



11th February 2026

Dear Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs,

I am writing on behalf of the Trustees of the Peak and Northern Footpaths Society, to express our serious concerns about walkers' safety where cows with calves are present in a field with a public right of way. Walkers are currently not safe from attacks by cattle.

Our Society is a charity committed to protecting users of rights of way and public access land. Since 1894, PNFS has defended the rights of everyone to use these routes and held landowners and councils to account for their duty to maintain them.

We have become aware that the risks to walkers using public rights of way, where cattle are present, has increased in recent years. Between 2015 and 2020, there were 4 public fatalities. However, according to data from the Health and Safety executive (HSE), between 2019 and 2023, 22 people in the UK were killed by cattle, with a significant number of these being walkers.

A campaign group 'COWS' (Concern Over Walkers Safety) has gathered data from members of the public who have experienced cattle attacks whilst on public footpaths in England and Wales. They have recorded 980 incidents since 2017. Of those 103 respondents reported having broken bones, concussion requiring hospital observation, punctured lungs, rupture of internal organs, coma or death.

It is our contention that these statistics underestimate the extent of the problem because many instances of attacks by cattle go unreported as do the numerous cases where walkers are deterred from using rights of way because of the presence of cattle. Nevertheless, existing statistics point to a serious matter of public safety.

In our view the HSE data and the COWS website data are prima facie evidence that the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974 is being regularly breached and insufficiently enforced by the HSE.

In this legislation there is a general duty in section 3(1) on every "employer" to "conduct his undertaking in such a way as to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that persons not in his employment who may be affected thereby are not thereby exposed to risks to their health or safety" and the equivalent duty on self-employed business owners, i.e. without employees, in section 3(2)). The known number of fatalities and injuries to walkers suggests that the existing HSE guidance to farmers stating that "Wherever possible keep cattle in fields that do not have public access, especially when cattle are calving or have calves at foot" is too often disregarded.

The current legislation is not sufficiently effective. We believe that further guidance for farmers is needed to improve public safety. For example:

- Farmers should be instructed not to place cattle with calves in fields where members of the public have a legal right to walk.
- If they do so, the cattle should be separated from the public by a permanent or temporary fence.

The Peak and Northern Footpaths Society has sought reassurance from HSE that active measures are in place:

1. to ensure that farmers are aware of the published advice
2. to monitor farmers' compliance with the published advice
3. to enforce compliance when farmers regularly ignore the advice

In the light of HSE's current data we feel it is incumbent upon us to raise this serious issue to protect our members and the wider public. There is an opportunity for the HSE and other Government organisations to put in place further safeguards, working with the agricultural industry, to deliver safer access for walkers across the Peak district and the North of England, and across the UK.

We consider this is a matter of increasing concern and that the HSE and, if necessary, the Government, takes action to address and ameliorate this risk to public safety.

Yours sincerely,



Kathy McLean OBE
Chair PNFS

cc. Emma Reynolds, MP.
Dame Angela Eagle, MP Minister of State for Food Security and Rural Affairs
Sarah Newton (Chair, Health and Safety Executive)
Sarah Albon (CEO of the Health and Safety Executive)