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# Open Country

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## Disabled people on green lanes

In their search for arguments that might persuade the public that motorbikes and 4x4s should be welcome on green lanes, vehicle user groups argue that the needs of disabled people will be met only if green lanes remain open to recreational motor vehicles. This argument is unsound, but it has to be countered, for it is cropping up all over the place.

The argument has two versions. Version one, which is not entirely preposterous, says that Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) that prohibit recreational vehicles should exempt blue badge holders. This would mean that vehicles that are driven by registered disabled drivers, or which carry disabled passengers, may continue to use green lanes from which other, non-essential vehicles are prohibited. This exemption would dramatically reduce the number of 4x4s, and virtually eliminate motorbikes. However, this version of the argument is rarely advanced. More commonly, version two is advanced.

Version two, which is contemptible, uses the alleged needs of the disabled as a supporting argument for the continuing use of green lanes by able-bodied vehicle users: disabled people are used as a cover for the activities of the able-bodied.

Both versions are founded on the conviction that provision must be made for disabled people who wish to experience green lanes by looking through the windscreen of a 4x4. This exhibits a lamentable understanding both of the broad range of disabilities and desires of those who hope to enjoy green lanes, and of what disabled people want when they are deep in the countryside. Sight-impaired, hearing-impaired, and learning-disabled people all use green lanes, on foot, along with people whose mobility is restricted and who cannot therefore climb over footpath stiles. This large group of green lane users regularly encounter the damage and nuisance inflicted by vehicle users. Surfaces are churned up, making walking difficult. Vehicle noise and fumes degrade the tranquillity that non-motorised users value, and direct encounters with vehicles - especially for blind, deaf and non-agile users - are hazardous. Some people with mental health issues can find the noise and pending threat, perceived or otherwise, of off-road recreational vehicles to be a very unpleasant experience.



It is obviously not in the interest of non-motorised disabled people to encounter 4x4s carrying disabled passengers. The blue-badge driver of a 4x4 degrades the amenity of non-motorised disabled people – and the non-motorised are a far, far larger group.

Developments in rugged versions of electric mobility scooters have opened up (for those who can afford them and manoeuvre them) exciting ways for people who cannot walk but who want to get away from the tarmac, out into the countryside. These 'Tramper'-type scooters may legally be used on footpaths, bridleways and in open access areas. The Yorkshire Dales National Park, in collaboration with the Disabled Ramblers, regularly hosts events that take scooter-users high into the fells, with minimal noise, with a very modest impact on the surface of the ground, and at a pace that accommodates partners walking alongside. If disabled drivers of 4x4s switched to Trampers, their horizons would be immediately expanded: they could venture into remote territory, accessible until recently, only to walkers. For other disabled people, the rapid development of 'mountain trikes' offers an even more environmentally-friendly countryside experience.

Green lanes must be open to everybody – the disabled no less than the able-bodied. But 4x4s and motorbikes, whether carrying disabled or able-bodied people, should have no place on them. The needs of disabled people can be met in much more imaginative and rewarding ways. *Open Country*, a Harrogate-based charity dedicated to getting disabled people into the outdoors, has a wide-ranging programme of activities that cater to the needs of people with all sorts of disability. The charity has been running for over 25 years and has accumulated a great deal of experience of giving disabled people the access to the countryside that the able-bodied take for granted. Its programme of activities runs throughout the year, rain or shine, and never uses motor vehicles away from the tarmac. The minibus that transports members from Harrogate into the surrounding countryside is parked on the tarmac, and members launch into the countryside on foot, on bicycles, on tandems and in wheelchairs. *Open Country* aims to give its members the experience of a tranquil, peaceful day in the countryside. Encounters with strings of 4x4s or motorbikes, or evidence of the damage that they have inflicted on the fabric of the green lanes, jeopardises the enjoyment, and sometimes the safety, of disabled people.

