



Land Use in England Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Land use in England

Monday 4 July 2022

4.20 pm

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Members present: Lord Cameron of Dillington (The Chair); Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville; Lord Borwick; Lord Curry of Kirkharle; Lord Goddard of Stockport; Lord Grantchester; Lord Harlech; The Earl of Leicester; Baroness Mallalieu; Baroness Redfern; Lord Watts; Baroness Young of Old Scone.

Evidence Session No. 20

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Questions 212 - 221

Witnesses

I: Kate Ashbrook, General Secretary, Open Spaces Society; Tompion Platt, Director of Operations and Advocacy, The Ramblers.

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Examination of Witnesses

Kate Ashbrook and Tompion Platt.

Q212 **The Chair:** Welcome to Kate Ashbrook and Tompion Platt to this evidence session of the Land Use in England Committee. You have access to the list of interests that have been declared by members of the committee. The meeting is being broadcast live via the parliamentary website. A transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the committee website, but you will have the opportunity to make corrections to that transcript where necessary.

Thank you very much. I will ask the first question. Perhaps you could give us an overview of your assessment of the current government land-use policy relating to access and recreation in rural areas, which includes AONBs, national parks and urban areas. I just wondered what your priorities might be for putting right any of the weaknesses that you see, which I suspect are numerous.

Tompion Platt: Thank you for inviting us to give evidence. I would like to start with a very quick reflection on the last couple of years that we have all experienced. We have all seen just how important access to nature is to our health and quality of life. There are huge amounts of evidence about that, which I am sure you are aware of.

We also saw, during the last couple of years, just how important green infrastructure is to enable us to access nature. When I talk about green infrastructure, I mean the path network, the open access land and all those green spaces in our urban environments. We all experienced, when we had that hour a day when we could leave the house, just how important those places were to our health and well-being.

Another thing that shone out through the pandemic was the huge inequality of access to green spaces, particularly for people who did not have gardens or green spaces and nature close to them. We saw the impact that that had. That was borne out too in some research that the Ramblers did in 2020, which looked at access to green spaces and found particular inequalities of access for black people and people of colour, and for people in lower socioeconomic groups.

I am giving that context to say where we are at. There are some good things happening. The Ramblers has been working for a number of years, with Natural England and other bodies, on a programme to open up the whole of the English coast path for everyone to enjoy and benefit from.

There are some good programmes, but our view is that these tend to be rather isolated and not joined up to a wider policy framework and set of priorities. Much more needs to be done in a joined-up way if people are to really feel the benefits to their health and well-being of being able to access nature.

We are going through a period of huge policy change, reforms to planning and agriculture, environmental enhancements, and in our view there is a

real chance to bring these together, to think holistically about how they can improve everyone's access to nature and to bring all those benefits about. I am sure you have picked up those themes already, and we are keen to emphasise that those agendas should be brought together.

We have five priorities for improving access to nature, which I will go through quickly and I am sure will be picked up later. First, we want to see a long-term strategic plan for access. Currently, we feel that it is strategically homeless. There is no ambition or plan for how we improve access to nature, and we have been calling for that to be part of the environment plan alongside a set of long-term targets. The Environment Act made provisions for the Government to do that, and we are calling on them to make sure that that happens in the 25-year plan refresh.

Secondly, we would like to make sure that access is right at the heart of the new ELMS payments scheme for land managers and farmers.

The Chair: Is it not at the heart of ELMS?

Tompion Platt: No, not so far. We were really pleased to see access as one of the public goods raised in the Agriculture Act. That was really brilliant, and we have heard some positive noises from Ministers, but we have yet to see any detail of how access will be delivered through ELMS. We have been told that some of that is coming, but we are yet to see it.

Going back to those priorities, the third was to create a more equal freedom to roam closer to where people live, so that more people can benefit from it. The fourth was about bringing nature into our urban areas, so that more people can access it closer to home. We are particularly keen on the idea of more green routes in our urban areas and are working with a number of local authorities and cities to introduce that.

The final and really pertinent priority for this conversation is putting access to nature at the heart of our planning and levelling-up reforms, because we really need to see planning deliver those public goods and access to nature so that people realise the benefits. That, I guess, is our starter for 10 of what we would like to see.

Kate Ashbrook: I should say that the Open Spaces Society endeavours to speak for all users, so we are not just walkers but riders and cyclists. We also support British canoeing in its aspirations for more access to water, riversides and lakes.

We feel very disappointed so far with government's lack of action on access. It is all very bitty. Defra struggles. Officials keep getting shifted around, so you keep having to repeat yourself. There is no coherent plan, quite honestly, yet we have the pledge in the 25-year plan to make sure that our natural environment can be enjoyed, used and cared for by everyone with high-quality, accessible natural spaces close to where people live and work.

It is very good news that this has now become a legal target under the Environment Act, but we have yet to see how Defra is planning to implement that. First and foremost, we want to see access central to decision-making and to policy across all government departments. It is not just Defra but all of them recognising the multiple benefits of public access to our health and well-being and to the local economy. It is very wide ranging, so it really should be first and foremost in people's minds.

Q213 Lord Watts: I am interested in urban access, because, quite frankly, lots of urban areas have no access to green space. Often, when you protect the green belt and use brownfield sites, that is the only open space that there is in many communities. One thing that I have pushed and would be interested to hear your view on is land swaps, where you would allow some development in the green belt if that was offset by greening some of the urban areas. I do not know whether that is something that you are interested in. I do not know how you view urban developments on brownfield sites against green-belt sites, because it seems to me that, in the last few years, there has been a conflict.

Tompion Platt: Land swaps are not something that I am particularly familiar with. It sounds like a good idea, but it is not something that I can comment on too much. This idea about making sure that we have good access to green spaces, particularly peri-urban, on the edge of our town and cities, is really important. When I talked in my answer to the first question about making sure that we have great access rights, particularly where people can access them, I am talking about the urban fringe in particular. Anything that we can do to protect those green spaces close to where people live is really important. As I said, the green corridors that connect people in urban areas to those green spaces and then out to the green spaces that surround towns and cities is really important.

Kate Ashbrook: Green belt does not automatically guarantee public access, though; there is not necessarily public access to green belt. I would not want to get into a brownfield versus green belt argument; I would rather leave that to CPRE. But one of the things that the Open Spaces Society presses for is open spaces within development.

I may say a bit more about this later, but one device that is not used is for the developer to be required to register the land as a town or village green, which gives local people rights of access there and protects the land for ever. It would give the community the sense that something real and tangible was being given in exchange.

Lord Watts: There is often competition between brownfield and green-belt sites. So far, in the last few years, it has always been the protection of greenfield sites against urban areas, which, although not in green belt, are the only areas in communities that people have access to for walking their dogs or taking exercise in. There is a conflict, and I am trying to work out how you would protect urban space in what are called brownfield sites. We need a new terminology for some of those areas, because they are not what they sound like. They are the only places where people can go.

Kate Ashbrook: I know it sounds odd, but if people have been using those sites for 20 years without being stopped and without asking permission, they can apply to register them as town and village greens. Provided that the threat of development has not happened, that land can be protected. If local people want to protect a space, there is a mechanism for doing that.

Q214 **Lord Goddard of Stockport:** The committee is considering options for land-use frameworks funding. How might provision for access and recreation be incorporated in that? What challenges might be created?

Kate Ashbrook: We are delighted to hear that you are proposing this framework, although it is quite hard to conceive of exactly how it will be.

The Chair: I am glad you think that.

Kate Ashbrook: I realise that at the moment it is a framework of a framework, but the concept is really good. We would go on the principles of accessibility—places being accessible; proximity—being close to people's homes; and connectivity—access linking up.

At the moment, we have an absolutely brilliant rights of way network. It is fabulous and we are so fortunate to have routes that are public highways, but lots of improvements could be made to them. We have access land, because we have access to commons and access to open country under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, but it is not necessarily in the most sensible place.

Lord Cameron will remember the whole process of mapping and how it was said for the South Downs that if you flick a paintbrush, you get these little specks of access land, but they do not actually connect up. So we would like to see much more cohesiveness to the network as well.

The challenges, really, are that if you have a framework, you can say all sorts of good things in it, but then they have to happen locally. You need to involve local people. There is the ELMS programme and the great opportunities there, for instance, which Tom will talk about later, but you need local people to be saying where they want and need access, so there needs to be a system for that.

Rights of way improvement plans, which came in under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, were a great idea but in practice not so good because no highway authority is required to implement its plan. Even when it has written a wonderful plan, there is no duty on it to implement it, and, of course, highway authorities are now very short of cash.

Recognising access in planning, and the opportunities that that would allow when development is taking place, is one really important element. Having a purpose for planning that includes people as well as climate and nature, which a number of organisations are trying to get into the levelling-up Bill, and thinking about how to involve people in all planning decisions, would be important. Natural England is doing some great work

on the green infrastructure standard and getting a much wider view of what is available where, so that decisions can be driven more by the data that is available.

That is a rather bitty answer, and Tom will probably want to add to it, but we are very supportive. There should be some important principles in there. People and access should be at the heart of any land-use policy or framework, because people need to have that opportunity of access, but also, by enjoying nature, they learn about it and want to protect it. Access should be core to that.

Tompion Platt: I do not have a great deal to add, other than to echo those comments and to say, like I said in my first answer, that the real problem is that access is strategically homeless and does not really sit anywhere. Like Kate, we were thinking about what a land-use framework looks like. Anything that considers the need for people to access green spaces, alongside those other land-use needs, is welcome, and, in fact, is needed if we are to do that and have the maximum benefit from them.

I would also point to a need to build on the current infrastructure that we have: the public rights of way network, the open space and those green parks. I urge you to look at Natural England's green infrastructure framework, which, for the first time, gives us some real data to make decisions about how we set ambitious targets on access to nature, using those frameworks as a baseline but also identifying areas where inequality of access exists and taking action to address them.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I have written that down: access is strategically, departmentally homeless. That is a good phrase.

Q215 **Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville:** This is a question for Tompion. You have already referred to ELMS, but in your written submission you called for land access incentives to be incorporated into the emerging ELMS frameworks. What might this look like in practice, and what problems would such an approach generate?

Tompion Platt: We were delighted that the Government included public access in the Agriculture Act as a public good for which financial assistance could be made available. That was a really important first step. As I said, there have been some encouraging noises, but we have not yet seen further detail from Defra, although we have been promised that some of that is forthcoming.

In terms of what that looks like in practice, we would like to see access embedded at all three tiers of the ELMS programme, which we have termed improving, creating and integrating. First, in a sustainable farming incentives scheme, we would like to see payments available to land managers who want to improve their current network, particularly around improving accessibility of the current network—for example, moving tricky stiles and creating openings so that different people can use those paths and networks. A recent stat from Natural England said that 20% of the paths network was inaccessible to people with a

disability, so there are some real opportunities to improve the existing network through that programme.

Secondly, at a local nature recovery level, we would like to see an opportunity for improvements and the creation of new access routes where there is a clear need. This goes back to Kate's earlier point that there is a real opportunity to consult with the local communities and understand where routes would benefit them the most. Perhaps that is creating good walking circular routes, allowing them to walk off busy roads and use an alternative path, or connecting local communities to really important local services. We would really like to see it thought about at that level.

On landscape recovery, it is really important, as it will be a theme today, that we look at access and environment improvements at the same time to make sure that the maximum benefits are realised. That is how we envision it delivering through all three elements of ELMS.

We understand that there is some risk to that. In particular, given that ELMS is voluntary, how do we ensure that there are access improvements across the network in all the different places? We have heard from the NFU, the CLA and others that they want to see access as one of the public goods that farmers can apply for, but, as we have seen through the tests and trials, it will be really important that Defra makes access and ELMS a really attractive proposition, sets out very clearly the advice and guidance, and gives flexibility around that.

The other challenge that has been put to us, and I am sure will be to you, is that the ELMS budget is finite. How do we make sure that that works for all the things that the Government want to do? We need to make sure that access is part of that, not only for those public health and well-being benefits, but because without the access element we are not allowing the public to realise the benefits of all those wonderful improvements to the environment and all the other things that we are hoping to see through ELMS. We are missing an opportunity, in our view, to connect up the public, land managers and farmers, so that they really can begin to understand the value that farmers play as custodians of those lands.

Q216 Lord Harlech: How might we balance the need for land access against other existing and emerging land-use priorities? For example, how can we ensure that increasing land access does not result in negative impacts on nature and biodiversity?

Tompion Platt: The first thing is to debunk this idea that access to nature and nature recovery are at odds with one another. The opposite is true. There is clear evidence that other human activities have a far bigger impact on nature recovery. The 2019 Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services report highlighted a range of drivers that were leading to a lack of biodiversity. Access and recreation did not feature in that at all. In fact, what did feature as a major barrier to nature recovery was a disassociation, if that is the right word, between society and nature. That is a real problem across the

environmental goals that we want to achieve. We need to get people into nature so that they value, experience and champion it. That needs to be part of the solution rather than seen as being at odds with it.

There is currently a large range of strategies, often overlapping and sometimes contradictory. When it comes to the environment perspective, there are some opportunities to bring those together. Particularly in the refresh of the 25-year environment plan, there is a really important opportunity to make sure that access is woven into that, alongside the other ambitions for nature recovery, so that both needs are met.

There are opportunities at a more local level through the local nature recovery strategies to make sure, again, that access and environmental improvements are looked at hand in hand. As Kate has already alluded to, there are real opportunities to put people, climate and nature right at the heart of the planning and levelling-up reforms. That is something we are pursuing with a number of other bodies to have included.

Lord Harlech: Is there sometimes a trade-off in opening up that public access, which, as you said earlier, is so essential to people, especially when they have been under lockdown or something like that? We also saw some really bad scenes and bad behaviour in Snowdonia, with littering and livestock worrying—things that worry the local community there, and worry farmers and land managers about the risks. Yes, public access is good, but when you are given something you have the responsibility to educate yourself about it and to behave in a good way.

Tompion Platt: There are certain locations where there is high demand for access. We definitely saw that through the pandemic, and we need to think about and manage that. Often the issues are not having the right infrastructure or, in fact, not having the education and the wider range of places that people can go to and enjoy. There are plenty of places to go. It is just when we get that concentration in a few places. That needs to be addressed and managed, and there are right ways to do that.

These few instances are presented as there being a contradiction between access and nature. The more important thing to remember is just how important access to nature is. In the bigger scheme of things, the threat to our nature and all those other things are not from walkers, but from all these other much bigger issues that we face and other pressures on land use from development and everything else. It is just about understanding it, giving it context and thinking about addressing that locally when it is needed.

Kate Ashbrook: Probably the main issue has been cars. The car is the enemy of all this, because people come in cars, bring their barbecues, park by the road, start a fire and all that. Access needs to be part of a much wider, sensible, integrated transport scheme, but that is a huge thing.

Of course there were issues, absolutely, but in the big scheme of things they were really quite limited. It was the honeypot areas. There has been

talk in the Government's response to Glover about giving rangers the power to make fixed penalty notices in order to deal with the people who are out to make trouble, but there are very few of those. Much more of it is about educating people so that they really understand the effect of what they do. By granting access, you make people care about things and take an interest. That was said way back in 1958 by the Royal Commission on Common Land. That was the start of access to commons: "Give people the right of access to commons and then they will understand how they are managed and the nature".

These things need to be worked on together, but I really do not think that because a few people have caused a problem that should prevent us thinking big about access, strategically and very positively.

Q217 Lord Curry of Kirkharle: I would like to ask a broader question on the definition of access. What do you mean by "access"? Is it just rambling, is it just walking? What else might you include in the definition of access?

Kate Ashbrook: We would go beyond walking, definitely. It includes horse riding, cycling and carriage driving, where appropriate. With all these things, it is about access where it is appropriate, and new kinds of access are being invented all the time. When I started work at the Open Spaces Society, nobody had heard of coasteering, for instance. I still do not really know what it is, but I know that it is relatively recent. It is much more than just walking, definitely. It is canoeing and kayaking on our rivers and canals.

The Chair: I can give you a lesson in coasteering.

Kate Ashbrook: Thank you.

Lord Curry of Kirkharle: What about social prescribing and children visiting farms from schools, et cetera? Is that included in your access definition?

Kate Ashbrook: Yes, absolutely. Enabling children to discover nature is vital. What has happened to Julian Glover's "night under the stars"—the one headline—in the Government's response? We have not seen government say, "Yes, let's think about how to achieve that". Farm visits and all that have their place, but we worry that when Defra talks about access, it tends to be thinking about Open Farm Sunday and not about wider access. All those things have a place, but we are talking about that sense of freedom and just the ability to enjoy being in nature and not having to think, "Am I in the right place?" A real sense of freedom is what we argued for at the time of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, which has come in, been so successful in so many places and not caused problems.

The Earl of Leicester: Kate, it pretty much answered my question when you spoke about someone not having to worry about being in the right place. I totally agree with you, Tompion, that sadly there is this huge disassociation of society from nature. It would be a fine thing if, by encouraging more people into the countryside, they would understand

nature, as you suggest. But I am very surprised to hear you say that it is not proven that, by allowing untrammelled access, there is huge disbenefit to biodiversity through disturbance. Very simple disturbance by people, generally walking with dogs, even on a lead, will frighten birds off nests.

Tompion Platt: I am sorry if I miscommunicated that. I was not saying that there were not things that need to be managed, but that they could be managed. Given the wider threats to nature recovery, when we look at the big picture on biodiversity loss and all those things, the evidence shows that the big threat is not walkers. As you started by saying, we need to get people into the countryside so that they care about it. We have seen through CROW and the way we have managed that that all sorts of national and local restrictions can be put in place to manage those things properly, so that, for example, people are not walking with dogs off lead in bird nesting seasons in those locations. We want to see those places protected. We want to walk in those places, but we want to see them protected for future generations, for us to enjoy.

The Earl of Leicester: There is, unfortunately, a large proportion of people—I wish it was smaller—who have no comprehension of when bird nesting season is.

Tompion Platt: We want people out and accessing the outdoors, so we need to think about how we give them that education and that information on the ground, and that infrastructure. Kate mentioned people coming and wanting to have barbecues, and how we deal with that. I spoke to someone at the National Trust recently about how huge numbers are coming into Dovedale in the summer, and how they managed that. Lots of those people want to have barbecues. They are new people who we want to see in the outdoors. Rather than telling them that they cannot do that, we have a plan to give them the infrastructure and let them barbecue in the right places so that they are not damaging the wider landscape. No one size fits all, but we need to manage that and think about those things in a local context.

Q218 **Baroness Young of Old Scone:** Good afternoon. Two things you wanted to promote were bringing access into ELMS in a practical way, having had the commitment but not much sign of the result, and bringing access more effectively into the planning and levelling-up Bill proposals. At what level and through what mechanism could that disturbance issue be dealt with most effectively? If a farmer applies to give more access through ELMS, where will the assessment of the impact of that be dealt with? How will it be resolved if there is a dispute about the issue, as you inevitably have around this room? Likewise, whatever you are hoping for in the planning and levelling-up Bill, how would you see it being dealt with in areas where there is a conflict of any kind? It may not be a disturbance conflict but one between access and other land uses or other environmental requirements. I declare an interest: the Woodland Trust got thoroughly trashed during lockdown, with large quantities of feet and dogs, and it was quite a problem.

Kate Ashbrook: On ELMS, that is a really interesting point, because the other point we are thinking about is how we can ensure that whatever access farmers are applying for will be worth having. They could be paid for something that nobody really wants.

It does seem that having more oversight of this would be really helpful. Natural England is the obvious body to do that, but sadly it probably does not have the resources to do it. It would be the obvious body to advise both on the whole biodiversity and nature element, but also on whether the new access was worth paying for. I throw that in as a thought.

As an aside, it would just be so good if ELMS would pay for improvements to the existing network, which would not then need this assessment, because the rights of way network is there. How good would it be if a farmer was paid to leave a wider path across the field than the miserable one-metre maximum, and was required to mow it and the headland where the path goes so that people had the confidence to use these routes? At the moment, in many places you have to be quite brave to go for a walk on rights of way. They are public highways, but they are not very obvious. The improvement side would just be wonderful.

On levelling up and the whole planning issue, it should just be a quid pro quo for developers offering something over a certain size that they provide something for the public, whether new rights of way or new access. The planning authority ought to be able to deal with that. If there is a biodiversity net gain test going on, the authority would be looking at that with professional advice and, similarly, it should be able to assess access, I would have thought.

Tompion Platt: I would echo all of that. You asked an interesting question about the level this should be done at. We are calling for a purpose of planning amendment at quite a strategic level. Unlike other legal frameworks, planning has no clear legal purpose, which is what causes a lot of the problems further down into the delivery of it. We want to see a clear purpose agreed, so that communities, developers and local authorities know what the purpose of planning is. That would give a much firmer foundation for the way it deals with levelling up and all the other things that we are hoping it to do.

Q219 **Baroness Mallalieu:** You have already told us, and we would all probably accept, that the existing rights of way and commons have a lot of problems. It is not just a lack of access; they are often not in the right places and do not join up. Tompion, you said that the problem with ELMS is that it is voluntary. All the indications are that we do not know precisely what will be in it or what the rates will be. They would have to be pretty substantial to persuade landowners and land managers to provide the sorts of major links that would make the network complete, but that is a possibility.

You also said that the incentives for making those improvements would be ELMS or the planning department putting in incentives, but I would like to ask you how a land-use framework could help to resolve the sorts

of problems that you have described. What other factors should it be considering? It is not going to have a pot of money.

Kate Ashbrook: No, but it has clear guidance as to what should be considered, and it has policies. We would say accessibility, proximity and connectivity for the access network, and it would have access at its heart. When you are thinking about other land uses, you would be thinking about them in conjunction with access. I realise that lack of money is a problem, with everything.

Natural England has an important role in this. I am disturbed to read in the recent White Paper on nature that Defra is thinking of doing away with it and sucking it up into other things, because Natural England has a really important role. I declare an interest as a former Countryside Agency board member, from which Natural England was born, but that access element of the Government's advice has always been really important, and it gets shrunk and shrunk because it is not a legal aspect as opposed to the nature conservation side, which is very important but tends to dominate. I would want to see Natural England having an important role in all this.

Q220 **Baroness Redfern:** How effective are local access forums as partnerships structures to manage land-use conflicts? Are there other examples of local and regional good practice in relation to access and recreation that might be applied at a larger scale through a land-use framework?

Kate Ashbrook: Local access forums were another good idea in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act. In practice, generally, they do not achieve a great deal. I am sure that there are a few that are good. That will depend on personnel and a strong highway authority that takes an interest in these things. For many authorities now, the local access forum is just a bit of a bore and something that they have to deal with. The problem is that they are not required to act on any advice that is given, so the forum can tend to degenerate into a talking shop. As I understand it, it does not always have that balanced membership. It strives to, but I understand that, quite often, the farming and landowning interests do not play their part there, because they do not feel much point in it.

Baroness Redfern: You are saying that it is poorly balanced.

Kate Ashbrook: Yes, but not intentionally. It is just that people are volunteers and, increasingly, it is getting difficult to get people to come to meetings if they cannot see that they will make a difference. At a meeting last week that I had with Cornwall Council, the user groups were saying, "We don't see any point in this. What we say doesn't make a difference. We want to be able to talk to the officers about individual rights of way problems and how they're to be resolved". You have a council that does not have or will not put sufficient resources into managing the rights of way network.

Although it is a good formula, it needs much more oomph. It needs the people on it to feel that they are making a difference so they will

participate. You need the authority to want the views of all the users and to be in a position to implement that. In these very hard-pressed times, they probably just do not have the bandwidth to do that.

There are some good ones. I am not saying they are all bad, but I do not think it is a really effective formula. I was trying to think about what you might have in its place, and it is quite difficult to know. Maybe one needs to talk to the members of the forums themselves and ask, "What do you think would be effective in your area to get stuff done?" I do not know that lifting it up to a regional level would necessarily help, because it is important to focus on a particular highway authority that has the duties to maintain the network and look after the access land.

Baroness Redfern: Should there be more target setting to drive change as such?

Kate Ashbrook: It would be great if the authority was then required to act on what the forum recommended, getting them more focused. Your land-use framework might be able to focus them on particular aspects, so it might be a successful way of doing that.

The Chair: We were in the outskirts of Birmingham last week. There is an area of land called eight hills in the south Birmingham/Bromsgrove area. It is in Bromsgrove District Council but belongs to Birmingham City Council. We were looking at access, and there was no doubt that the access was being driven by the councils and not necessarily by any local access groups. That was quite interesting. Members of the council thought that this was really important for their communities, particularly the BAME community.

Kate Ashbrook: Is this in the Lickey Hills?

The Chair: Yes, exactly.

Kate Ashbrook: I know the Lickey Hills. They are brilliant.

The Chair: There was no doubt that it was beginning to happen.

Tompion Platt: I share a very similar view to Kate's about the current state of play, but we have been told that when they do have that mandate there are examples of them working well. They are listened to and are resourced. There is a feeling in the Ramblers that there is a bit of untapped potential there, and perhaps if there was a clearer land-use framework it could be used to help enact those national land-use frameworks locally.

We need to think about how we get a diversity of voices to the table. The current local access forums are not working particularly well for that, so we need to think about how we get that greater diversity of voices to help with some of these decisions.

Lord Borwick: The question about other measures or incentives was answered by Tom in his first answer to your question, so we can probably

say that we are done. We have been saved by the bell. The only question that I had—maybe you could consider writing to the committee—is about the cost of the alternatives that you propose.

The Chair: Do not answer for the moment. The members of the committee all want to vote.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Q221 **The Chair:** Aside from statutory policy and regulation, what other measures or incentives might be supported to help promote and enhance inclusive access to quality open space? Where is the money going to come from? How are we going to pay for it? To some extent, you have already answered this question, but you might want to add to it.

Tompion Platt: Part of the first question is about how we promote and enhance inclusive access.

First, we need to include a greater diversity of voices in these discussions and in the setting and planning of the policy and regulations. A challenge for all of us—people in the sector and a group like this—is how we engage a more diverse range of people to feed into those policies, regulations and solutions. In the last couple of years, through the pandemic, we have seen some really great attention and voices coming forward from a whole range of communities to talk about access and the importance of nature.

Secondly, a big piece about education is required alongside the infrastructure changes. We have recently seen the countryside code revamped by Natural England, but it has very little resource and there is very little promotion of it, so the public's awareness and understanding of their rights and responsibilities in the countryside is not delivered. A piece about education needs to be done, particularly at a younger level.

Thirdly, alongside the infrastructure, there are some brilliant programmes out there. I will name two, if I may, from the Ramblers. One is the Out There Award, which gets 16 to 25 year-olds from urban areas into the countryside and gives them the skills and the confidence to go out and walk and to benefit from being outdoors. Our Paths to Wellbeing project works directly in communities to get them to look at their local path network and their local environment. They are now planning their routes, going out, fixing stiles and gates, planting trees and removing invasive species. They are just two examples. It is not just the Ramblers. There are many others that have good programmes in place. Those, alongside the policy and regulation, are well worth looking at.

The trickier question with all this is always the cost. How do we meet the cost? I can only say that we have more of a chance of doing this if we do not see access as a separate thing that we need to come to later. How do we integrate our thinking at those different levels, like we said, so that we think about access right at the start in the planning and land-use

framework, so that we look at the opportunities to improve access alongside the opportunities to improve nature?

There are land managers who value and want to spend money on access to nature. We are seeing that through the tests and trials, so it is about making those incentives flexible and encouraging people to take them up.

Kate Ashbrook: There are always savings to the health budget if people are healthier. There are figures for that, so it is saving money in other places as well as spending it on access. As Tom says, if access is in at the start, some of the costs will be absorbed by other government departments, because they will be doing something about access instead of standing back and letting it all fall on Defra. Making it across the board would make quite a difference.

The Chair: That ends our time of questioning, so thank you both very much for coming. It has been a very good session and we will undoubtedly have a section on access in some form or other in our report.

Kate Ashbrook: If we can provide anything further in writing, let us know.

The Chair: Thanks very much.