

Written evidence submitted by Ramblers (WoD0033)

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee inquiry: The work of Defra

Evidence from the Ramblers, 15 March 2023

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Committee's call for evidence overlooks a critical policy area for which Defra is responsible; **public access to and engagement with the natural environment**. While this may not be reflected on its website as a priority, the policy area was a key part of the 25 Year Environment Plan and the theme been carried forward into the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023, with a new commitment to ensure that everyone is within 15 minutes' walk of green and blue spaces¹. There is responsibility for public access within the ministerial team, currently with the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Natural Environment and Land Use), and officials in the department focus on public access matters within the 30 x 30, Landscapes, Access & People Team.
- 1.2 An inquiry which fails to **consider Defra's progress on improving public access will not result in a sufficiently comprehensive analysis of the department's overarching performance**. This evidence details our view on how well Defra is doing with regards its public access responsibilities and ambitions. We begin with a summary outlining why access to the natural environment matters. We then detail our opinion of what is currently going well, before moving onto the shortcomings in leadership, strategy, priorities and resourcing. We end with recommendations that need to be adopted to address these.

2. Why public access matters

- 2.1 Countless studies confirm that access to the outdoors delivers multiple health and wellbeing benefits. While too numerous to cite in this short evidence, it is clear that getting out in nature, whether in our rural or urban areas, enriches our lives and can foster a greater understanding of the natural world, critical in addressing the disconnect that has been shown to be a driver of biodiversity loss. Better public access can help people to better understand the work undertaken by farmers as producers and as custodians of the countryside, and rural economies benefit from increased visitor spend.
- 2.2 However, we also know that access to nature for many is far from guaranteed. Our own research² undertaken during the height of pandemic restrictions found that only 57% of GB adults questioned said that they lived within five minutes' walk of green space, be it a local park, nearby field or canal path. That figure fell to just 39% for people from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic background and 46% among all GB adults with a household income of under £15,000. This is compared to 63% of those with a household income over £35,000 and 70% over £70,000. The government's own Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 highlighted that 38% of people are more than 15 minutes' walk to green and blue spaces.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ambitious-roadmap-for-a-cleaner-greener-country>

² <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/walkinnature>

2.3 The array of benefits to be gained through improved public access, coupled with the fact that provision (by which we mean the public rights of way network, open access land and parks and green spaces) is far from equally distributed, means it is imperative that action is taken to address deficiencies so more people can benefit from the experience. To a significant extent, local authorities are critical in achieving this, given their important role in upholding access rights and responsibilities laid down in legislation, and in playing a leading role in the planning and development process. However there is also a critical role for Defra in ensuring national legislation, strategy, policy and delivery is as effective and supportive as it can be in enabling more people to get outdoors and connect with nature.

3. What is going well?

3.1 It is important to note that we welcome Defra's policy ambition, carried forward from its 25 Year Environment Plan into the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023, to ensure that the natural environment "*...can be enjoyed, used by and cared for by everyone.*" This is an important principle which should underpin decision-making across government, not just Defra. That this has been supplemented in the recent **EIP2023** with a **commitment to ensure nobody is more than 15 minutes' walk from green and blue spaces** is also encouraging.

3.2 The ongoing commitment from Defra (and Natural England) to complete the **England Coast Path**³ by the end of this parliament is a significant intervention that will have a positive impact in enabling more people to get outdoors. When complete, it will be the longest coastal path in the world, allowing anyone visiting the coast to enjoy a high quality walk in either direction. It is a fantastic gift to the nation and a major achievement which will pay back in health, wellbeing benefits for individuals and tourism benefits for communities. It is to Defra's credit that this project is nearing completion, but there is still more work to be done to ensure that the entire trail is open and usable by 2024 and that plans are in place for its ongoing maintenance and management.

3.3 The government's manifesto commitment to turn the **Coast to Coast**⁴ path across northern England into a National Trail is welcome. We understand that work is underway on making this a reality, with the status of National Trail meaning the route should, in theory at least, be supported with greater resources to make it more accessible to more people. By its very nature however, and without wishing to diminish the value of this initiative, the route will not have an impact on the majority of people as they go about their day to day lives.

3.4 Natural England has launched a new **Green Infrastructure Standards Framework**⁵, designed to support local authorities to assess and improve local provision of 'green infrastructure' (including paths, trees, sustainable drainage). New GI tools, which include for the first ever digitised map of England's rights of way network, will help local authorities to target access and greening improvements where they are most needed. The GI standards are set

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/england-coast-path-overview-of-progress>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-national-trail-status-awarded-for-popular-coast-to-coast-route>

⁵ <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/Home.aspx>

to be a brilliant resource, but only if struggling councils are given support, including training and funding from Defra, to implement the guidance; otherwise, it risks becoming another set of guidance that sits on a shelf.

- 3.5 Defra have begun the process of **reviewing maps of open countryside where the freedom to roam** applies under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000. The maps showing where the public have a freedom to roam have not been updated since 2004, despite a statutory requirement that they be updated every 10 years. So it is welcome that Defra have asked Natural England to start considering how the review should be undertaken. There is widespread acceptance that the initial mapping of downland was not successful⁶. Many areas expected to be opened were not due to the very complicated, technical exercise undertaken to produce maps, meaning fewer spaces for recreation in southern England. Anomalies in mapping created access islands, where the public have a freedom to roam but are unreachable by legal means, such as a public right of way or road. Ramblers would like Defra to go further and use the opportunity of the mapping review to extend access to woodland and inland riverside, as these land types are currently not included in the CRoW Act.
- 3.6 Outside of these programmes, Defra initiatives which have the potential to improve public access to and engagement with the outdoors are limited and it is by no means certain that they will result in targeted improvements where they are needed. The **Farming in Protected Landscapes programme (FiPL)** does allow land managers to be paid for the provision of new access and improvements to existing routes, however it is time limited and due to come to an end in 2025. The **Woodland Creation** grants, administered by the Forestry Commission, allows additional payments for permissive (i.e. not permanent) access for those land managers who wish to take up this offer but to date it is far from clear how much of an impact this has had on the ground, and we have concerns (which will be detailed in section 4) that woodland creation is resulting in a loss of existing public access rights.
- 3.7 Finally, there is the £14.5 million **Access for All** programme, recently announced in the EIP2023. We welcome this announcement – any additional funding is welcome – however it will be spread extremely thinly given it is earmarked to deliver a range of projects, including improvements to National Trails, a review of open access maps, improvements in access in deprived communities and improvements to the accessibility of protected landscapes.

4. What are the shortcomings?

- 4.1 Naturally we welcome interventions designed to improve public access to and engagement with the outdoors. There is however a fundamental problem with the programmes outlined above – they are currently strategically homeless. **There is no central national strategy or plan** to which they belong; one that guides decision making and identifies deficiencies in access provision to target action and support where it is needed most. In some instances (FiPL, woodland creation grants) improvements in access are entirely optional – there is no

⁶ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-01-11/120841>

guarantee that anything will change. Their execution may in fact reduce public access rights. As an example⁷, the woodland creation scheme promoted by the Forestry Commission has resulted in a loss of open access rights, as this case study indicates. In a nutshell, **public funds have led to a loss of public rights**. This shows clearly that there is an urgent need for a strategic approach, coordinating different parts of Defra and its agencies, so that different objectives are considered alongside one another.

- 4.2 The department may argue that the EIP2023 *is* the plan, but the reality is that this is more a list of actions that might be taken and a **far cry from the strategic approach that is necessary**. It is far from clear how the actions described in the plan will add up to addressing the high-level commitment of ensuring that nobody is more than 15 minutes' walk from a green or blue space.
- 4.2 This can perhaps be explained by the **lack of priority afforded to public access in recent environmental policy reforms**. The Environment Act 2021 enables the government to set out plans for improving 'engagement with the natural environment' as part of **EIPs**, but there is no legal requirement for it to do so. The same applies to target setting. The Act includes a power enabling the government to set **targets** to improve engagement with the natural environment, but once again there is no compulsion to do so. This explains why the new EIP2023 includes a 'commitment' to improve access, as opposed to a legally-binding target with progress overseen by the independent Office for Environmental Protection.
- 4.3 This **two-tier approach**, with greater priority afforded to 'purer' environmental goals, perpetuates the longstanding, and problematic, separation of policy governing public interactions with the outdoors and the environment. This is despite evidence that it is the disconnect between society and nature that is a driver in biodiversity loss. **Access to the outdoors is part of the solution**, not the problem.
- 4.4 The lower priority afforded to public access in recent legislative reforms inevitably has an impact on policy design being undertaken by Defra. For example, **Environmental Land Management** options for improving public access (as provided for by the Agriculture Act 2020) are woefully inadequate, with Defra only recently beginning to explore how the regime *might* be configured to improve access, despite the regime being due for roll-out in 2024 and a clear message from the farming community that it is interested in receiving payments in exchange for access improvements. Given that the new system is supposed to be underpinned by the concept of 'public payments for public goods', and considering that public access improvements are one of the most directly beneficial and immediately experienced public goods, it is a mystery to us why progress has been so poor.
- 4.5 **Local Nature Recovery Strategies** (LNRs), and guidance to support their development, also show no signs of integrating public access considerations, despite the department's claim that they should do precisely that⁸. This matters because LNRs will be one of the guiding mechanisms to target interventions, resources and funding in the future.

⁷https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1115688/FC_Case_Study_Elslack.pdf

⁸<https://consult.defra.gov.uk/land-use/local-nature-recovery-strategies/>

- 4.6 Alongside the lack of proactive integration of public access into wider Defra policy, recent **decisions taken by ministers will actually stand in the way** of the department meeting its commitment to ensure more people can access and enjoy the natural environment. In recent weeks it has become clear that ministers are about to **renege⁹ on commitments¹⁰ made last year to repeal the 2026 deadline for recording historic rights of way** – routes that are public but do not appear on official maps. At the Ramblers we have discovered¹¹ potentially 49,000 miles of these paths, but all are at risk unless applications are submitted to local authorities for their addition to definitive maps by 1 January 2026.
- 4.7 Despite limited positive programmes and initiatives, it is our view **that public access considerations are falling through the cracks** in key policy areas being progressed by the department. It is at best a secondary consideration, more often an afterthought. To address this requires a shift in thinking, leadership and the introduction of a more strategic approach that elevates public access objectives alongside other priorities. Without these changes, we cannot see how Defra will achieve its 15 minutes' walk ambition.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 Statements from ministers and policy papers published by Defra point to an understanding of the importance of access to the outdoors and the need to ensure that more people can connect with nature. **But there is a gulf between these sentiments and the leadership, policy and resourcing** required to deliver change on the ground. We recommend the following should be considered to improve access to and engagement with nature:
- Defra needs a **strategic approach**, perhaps by way of a national plan for access, to properly guide its thinking, interventions and resourcing, and integrate these objectives within wider environmental policy and the programmes supported by its agencies.
 - **Legally-binding targets** for improving access are required to maintain a focus over the long-term. The commitment in the EIP2023, as welcome as it is, is not sufficient.
 - **Environmental Land Management** must include options for farmers to be rewarded for improving existing access and for the creation of new routes where there is a clear need.
 - **Ministers should maintain their commitment to repealing the 2026 deadline** for recording historic rights of way. If they fail to do so, tens of thousands of miles of public rights of way are potentially at risk of being lost forever.
 - Defra must provide funding for local authorities so they can **implement green infrastructure standards**. This should also include funding to help local authorities improve existing green leisure walking routes in urban areas, such as the Salford Trail and the London Loop and to create new routes in nature-poor areas, so that more people can enjoy a walk in green space without having to travel far or make a big effort.
 - Defra must improve **access to downland, and expand open access rights to woodland and inland waterside**. The statutory review of maps must be conducted without further

⁹ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-02-22/150378/>

¹⁰ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-10-10/59009>

¹¹ <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/dont-lose-your-way-2026.aspx>

delay. A new approach to mapping downland is needed, so that more open spaces, close to centres of population, can be opened for recreation. Any new mapping approach must connect 'access islands' to the walking network. Expanding access to woodland would double the amount of access land open to walkers and create spaces for recreation closer to where people live, reducing the distance to access land to just 20 minutes for deprived communities¹². Access should also be extended to inland watersides. More than half of the population live within 10 minutes of a waterway¹³. Creating corridors of access along watersides could provide a vital space for recreation, in many cases near to where people live.

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¹² <https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/government-lake-district-peak-district-english-b2235756.html>

¹³ <https://waterways.org.uk/waterways/using-the-waterways/cycling>