

## Written Evidence submitted by The Trails Trust (MH0033)

The Trails Trust is a registered charity dedicated to improving access for all (multi-user access) to the countryside by promoting, creating and upgrading of rights of way on foot, by bicycle, horse mobility scooter and carriage. The Trails Trust considers that much of the rights of way network is disconnected, inaccessible and often poorly maintained. This has been the case for many years due to a lack of funding for rights of way to highway authorities.

It is known that access to nature and the countryside is of great benefit to mental well-being; both in terms of preventing and maintaining our mental health. “Our relationship with nature – how much we notice, think about and appreciate our natural surroundings – is a critical factor in supporting good mental health and preventing distress.” (Mental Health Foundation; 2021). The government has stated its intention of making improvements to the environment and provisions for the public enjoyment of this: “Government is seeking “to improve social justice by tackling the pollution suffered by those living in less favourable areas, and by opening up the mental and physical health benefits of the natural world to people from the widest possible range of ages and backgrounds”. (A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment', Defra; 2018-2021.)

Evidence shows that where people have at least 120 minutes of exposure to ‘nature’ per week, this helps with their physical and mental well-being (Nature: Scientific Reports (2019) 9:7730).

### 1. Re challenges faced by people living and working in rural communities.

Many people in rural communities live alone or with very limited abilities for regular contact with others. This isolation can impinge on their mental well-being. Access to other groups and community organisations and therefore the ability to socialise, is often limited due to poor public transport. Those who cannot drive will, likely be most affected. The one form of 'access' that does exist in rural areas is our network of rights of way (in England and Wales). However, there are particular, often unacknowledged but serious problems with the current state of this network. These issues restrict and inhibit access for many people. There are two aspects which need to be addressed:

- Cultural matters and countryside access
- Physical access issues (limited rights of way).

### 2. Cultural matters.

People of black, Asian and minority ethnic communities do not use access to the countryside as much as other groups do. The reasons for this are complex, but more should be done to encourage better access for all members of society.

### 3. Physical access issues.

Most rights of way (78%) are recorded merely as 'footpaths'. Only those who walk have easy access to most rural footpaths. Other classes of rights of way (bridleways and byways) allow access for cyclists and horse riders, but this comprises a mere 22% of England's network (BHS 2021).

### 4. Enabling access for all

There is clearly a great *potential* for making massive improvements, nationwide in public

access for all (not just walkers) by upgrading many footpaths to bridleways or byways to allow access for those who prefer to use bicycles, mobility scooters or horses. Some people will feel more confident and able in using our rights of way if they can do so by means other than walking. With this in mind, the Trail Trust is asking for **two issues** in particular to be addressed.

- Provide additional well targeted funding for the creation, upgrading and improvement of the rights of way network.
- Integrate this provision with Defra's Environmental Land Management schemes.

Currently Defra is carrying out great changes in government support for landowners and land managers. This is changing from the basic payment scheme (BPS), to a post Brexit 'public benefit' scheme delivering public goods. Funds for this are in terms of many billions of pounds per year. The Trails Trust has felt enormously privileged to take part in the Defra Tests and Trials programme delivering a successful Environmental Land Management Test 159 'how to incentivise green infrastructure access and biodiversity creation'. The test report and appendix can be found here <http://www.thetrailstrust.org.uk/downloads/Elms-report-appendix.zip>

The test found that landowners and land managers understood the benefits and value of a strategic multi user rights of way network to themselves and to their communities, subject to reasonable reward, route location and infrastructure and public education and are willing to create, upgrade and improve rights of way and wildlife corridors.

TTT is pleased to note that public access is included in many of the Defra schemes and are working on a second test proposal which, if successful will provide a unique toolbox aimed at enabling landowners and land managers to provide more access and greater biodiversity. TTT urges Government to provide every opportunity to add value to the rights of way network by supporting landowners and land managers to create new access and improve/upgrade current rights of way.

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