

Title: Responding to a consultation

Reference: CAM007



Responding to consultations

The Ramblers is recognised as Britain's leading walking charity, and as having expertise in matters relating to rights of way and access to open country, and in organising walks and devising routes for walks. Our expertise in these fields is recognised by the fact that the Regulations to the Highways Act 1980, the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 prescribe the Ramblers as an organisation which must be served with notices of Orders made under those Acts which seek to change the public rights of way network or to add or delete paths from the definitive map. This note is not about responding to those notices (separate advice on those special issues is available from the Walking Environment Team); it is about responding to consultations by local authorities, and by national organisations on local issues. This is an important element of our campaigning and gives Ramblers Areas and Groups the opportunity to communicate their knowledge and expertise of walking issues directly to decision makers. In this way we are able to influence the development of their policies so that they better reflect the needs and aspirations of walkers.

When should I respond?

Don't feel that you must make a response to every consultation which comes your way. Once you get on a local authority mailing list you may find that you are sent consultation documents on subjects which you consider to be beyond your expertise or remit. The key question which you need to ask is whether the subject under consideration falls within our charitable aims, particularly as set out in our current business plan where our key external aims are to seek to achieve good quality walking environments (people are more likely to walk, and to enjoy it more, if their walking environments are of the highest quality) and to make walking accessible to all (we want to be do much more to spread the positive message about walking, ensuring that those who do not currently walk very much have access to the pleasures which walking can bring). If the consultation doesn't fall within those areas do not feel obliged to respond. Staff at central office are always available to advise you on the need to respond and on specific Ramblers policy issues. However, it is always the case that consultations on national issues will be dealt with by staff who will produce a response on behalf of the whole organisation once they have consulted with volunteers. If in doubt about whether you should be producing a response at local level always check first.

Tips on responding

Say who you represent and explain your authority and expertise on the issue in hand

You can do this by way of an introductory paragraph along the following lines:

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The Ramblers works to help everyone realise the pleasures and benefits of walking, and to enhance and protect the places where people walk, whether rural or urban. As Britain's walking charity, the Ramblers is at the heart of walking with around 125,000 members across Great Britain and xxx* in the x Groups which make up xxx Area. We campaign for good quality walking environments in both urban and rural areas, as well as working to make walking accessible to all. We promote walking by offering an extensive led walks programme with over 500 walks a week, including an increasing number of shorter and easier walks and walks suitable for families with children. We also deliver projects that specifically target insufficiently active people, those from socially excluded communities and those that suffer from health inequalities, such as our Lottery-funded Get Walking Keep Walking project. Established in 1935, we are currently celebrating our 75th anniversary.

[* insert information about your own Area as appropriate]

Include the contact details of the Ramblers volunteer who is dealing with the matter so that the local authority knows who they can approach for further information or with any queries. If for any reason you do not wish your response to be published then make it clear in your response that you wish it to be treated as confidential.

Evidence and examples

Obviously any arguments you make or views you express will be far stronger and more likely to be heeded if you back them up with evidence and examples, or if you are able to say that you consulted the members in your Area, or that a motion was passed at your Area AGM. All of this will help to give your arguments legitimacy. Append any documentary evidence which supports your position.

Construction or criticism?

It is usually the case that the Ramblers is a 'critical friend' of its local highway authority. Very often the local rights of way officers are doing their best with limited budgets and they are often grateful for our support of their services and of our lobbying to improve funding. In responding to some consultations it may therefore be necessary to tread a very fine line when expressing concerns about the service. By all means highlight the problems and shortcomings but try to be constructive in proposing the way forward.

Form of response

Many consultation documents ask specific questions of the respondent. If that is the case then try to follow the format requested. Unfortunately, this is often frustrating and does not allow you to say what you really want to get across. Don't be afraid to put these additional comments on separate sheets. If there are questions which you cannot

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answer then leave them out, and don't include unnecessary or irrelevant information. If the consultation does not ask specific questions then ensure that your response is concise and clear and that it refers as necessary to the paragraph numbers or pages of the consultation document. Use your own paragraph numbering system if necessary and sub-headings or bullet points if appropriate. Number your pages. Use Ramblers headed paper for the first page (or for a separate covering letter). If your response is long include a summary of your main concerns, either at the beginning or at the end.

Avoid a last minute response

The Government's code of practice on consultation recommends a minimum of 12 weeks for the submission of responses but this is only a recommendation and will largely depend on the nature of the consultation exercise so make a careful note of the closing date for comments and try to avoid a last minute response.** Not only will this avoid putting yourself under pressure, it will ensure that the consulting organisation has plenty of time to consider your response. In the event that you have only found out about the consultation at the last minute then it is worth while contacting those conducting the consultation to see if they will accept a late response from you.

[** Note in particular that consultation relating to planning applications and paths orders will be much shorter than this and that, once made, public path orders have a 4 week period in which objections must be submitted which for definitive map modification orders is extended to six weeks.]

Summary

Responding to consultations is a very useful means of furthering our campaign aims at the invitation of the bodies we are seeking to influence. As Britain's walking charity we are acknowledged experts in the fields of rights of way, access to the countryside and the promotion of walking—our views are therefore respected and we should make the most of the opportunities provided by consultation exercises

