

# The Ramblers 1<sup>st</sup> Mystery Walker Report

## A survey of the path network in 2011



Conducted by over 1600 Ramblers and  
Mystery Walkers

January – August 2011



# **Mystery Walker Report**

## **Summary**

Over 1600 Mystery Walkers recruited by the Ramblers have checked a sample of 1690 miles of footpaths in England this year, covering the vast majority of highway authority areas. The survey found that after years of investment from local government, the path network is in great condition, with an average score of 23.9 out of 30 (80%). In a time of cuts to local authority budgets, where rights of way budgets in places such as Rochdale (the third lowest scoring authority) are being cut by 50% it is predicted that the results may not be so positive in the future.

## **Headline Figures**

- **20% of the authorities included in the survey scored over 90%**
- **Wakefield was the best authority scoring 100%.**
- **46% of authorities were “very good”**
- **50% of authorities were “good”**
- **4 % of authorities were “satisfactory”**
- **No authorities were less than “satisfactory”**
- **Waymarking was the lowest scoring determinative with 12% authorities having “less than satisfactory” waymarking.**
- **85% of authorities scored a “satisfactory” or higher score in all determinatives (e.g. waymarking, obstructions, undergrowth and over-growth etc.)**

## **Introduction**

Walking (with or without a dog) is the most popular way that people enjoy the Natural Environment, approximately 1.9 billion visits were made in 2010/11.<sup>1</sup> When people go walking, either in the city or the countryside, they take advantage of the 100,000 miles plus of path network available for everyone to use.

In the 1980s and 1990s the Countryside Commission/Agency carried out a number of surveys to assess the condition of rights of way across the country. The poor state of the network shown by these surveys was, in part at least, the stimulus for the national target that all paths should be legally defined, properly maintained and well promoted by the Year 2000. Every local authority (with the possible exception of the Isle of Wight) failed to reach that target. A final 5% survey was carried out in 2000 and no national surveys have been done since then. A single “easy to use” performance indicator (called the BV178 or BVPI survey) covered both ease of use and signposting was prescribed for English highway authorities for the 2001-02 financial year and remained in use until 2004-05.

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<sup>1</sup> Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment: The National Survey on People and the Environment Annual report from the 2010-2011 Survey published June 2011 Natural England

The surveys did highlight the link between highway authority expenditure and path condition. At this time of Government indifference to rights of way and access (demonstrated perhaps by the lack of more recent surveys and the dropping of the BVPI index) and local authority budget cuts, where rights of way budgets are under increasing threat, the Ramblers are keen for a regular survey of paths in England and so have stepped in to create a survey using “Mystery Walkers”.

Reports by Mystery Walkers have the potential to benefit the walking environment in various ways. The act of merely walking the paths itself helps to keep them open; and reports about the state of the network provide evidence that the public are using it, or trying to. They also help to focus the highway authority’s attention on localities in which paths have become neglected. In addition, ‘good’ reports can be a morale-booster to hard-pressed council rights-of-way staff, very many of whom are dedicated and committed enthusiasts constrained by depleting resources. Councillors, too, who have not yet seen the economy-promoting, health-enhancing and environment-improving qualities that a well-funded and carefully-managed footpath network brings with it, may be similarly impressed.

### The Survey

The “Mystery Walker survey”, while inspired by the Countryside Commission/Agency surveys, is very different. As a charity, the Ramblers do not have the resources to support and publicise a survey looking in detail at every stretch of path involved and highlighting individual obstructions where encountered. Instead, the Ramblers were looking to carry out a “light touch” survey that anyone could take part in, regardless of their age, ability or knowledge of rights of way law. However, an external consultant who used to co-ordinate the surveys for the Countryside Commission helped to devise the survey questions and helped to ensure that the results could be as statistically robust as possible. The Countryside Commission/Agency surveys also looked at the suitability of paths for different users (e.g. horse riders, cyclists etc.), while this survey just looks at the suitability of paths for walkers.

The Ramblers recruited 1512 “Mystery Walkers” who surveyed 1690<sup>2</sup> miles of path in England and Wales. The project was publicised through Ramblers communications (such as *walk* magazine, e-newsletters and the website) and also in walking media such as *Outdoors Magic*, *Grough* and *TGO* and in regional media including *BBC Cumbria* and *BBC Radio Devon*. Despite the bulk of the publicity being in Ramblers communications, half of the people who signed up to be Mystery Walkers were not Ramblers members and 75% asked to be kept up-to-date with Ramblers campaigns. This shows how important paths are to everyone, not just Ramblers members.

Mystery Walkers were assigned a grid square close to where they live and asked to carry out a two mile walk starting in the grid square and staying within the highway authority boundary. Two miles was chosen as the length because it is seen as a standard length of walk in other surveys<sup>3</sup>. This survey will be a rolling

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<sup>2</sup> The reason for the discrepancy between the figure is that not all Mystery Walkers submitted results in time for the first published report

<sup>3</sup> The 2002 General Household Survey found that 46% of adults had gone on a two mile walk in the past 12 months, 35% in the past four weeks.

project with reports to be produced regularly so that future studies can highlight any changes to the condition of the network.

Mystery Walkers were asked to rate their walk out of 5, broadly meaning:

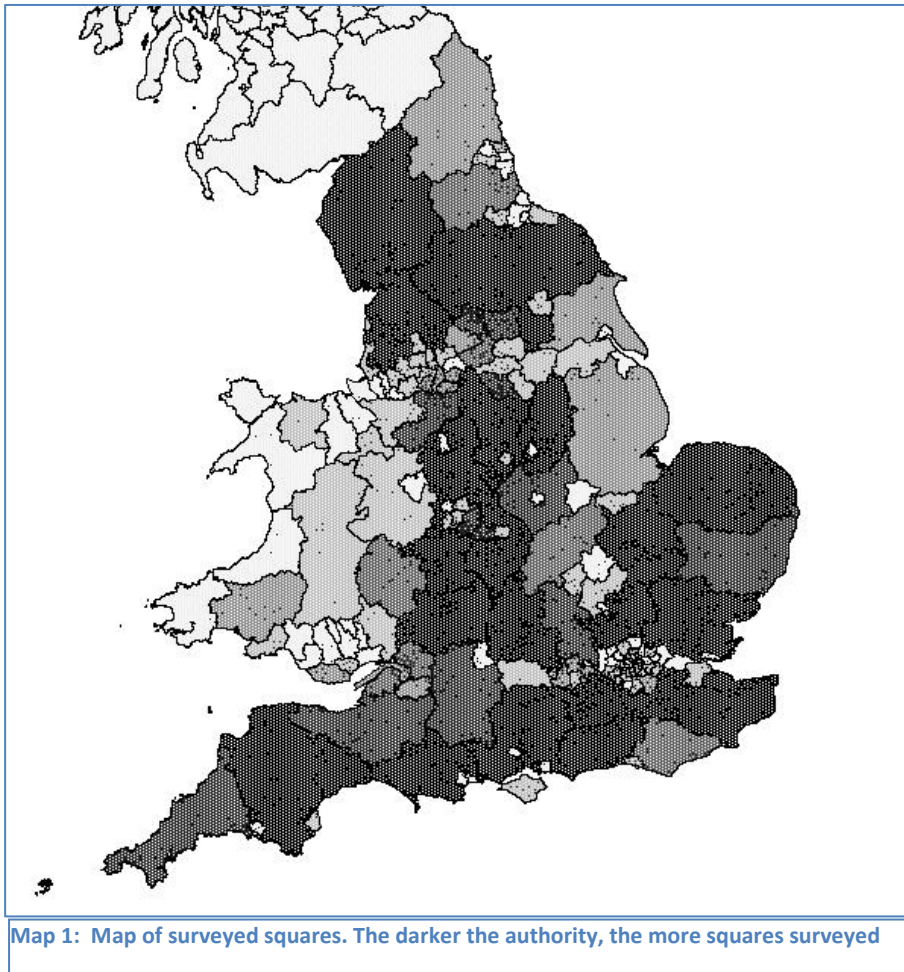
- 5 = Excellent
- 4 = Good
- 3 = Satisfactory
- 2 = Not Good
- 1 = Poor

for:

- Obstructions
- Surface conditions
- Waymarking
- Undergrowth and overgrowth
- Level of “welcome” that walkers felt (e.g. absence of deterring notices, aggressive dogs or landowners).

These five categories were chosen because they are the main issues that are important to walkers. Plus, it is the duty of the highway authority to ensure that rights of way are unobstructed, in good condition, well waymarked and that nothing is deterring use of the way. Mystery Walkers were also asked to rate the walk for how much they enjoyed it as a whole. The survey was subjective as Mystery Walkers were not given specialist training in how to carry out the survey; however, Mystery Walkers were given guidance notes on how to grade the walk. This can be found at [www.ramblers.org.uk/Campaigns+Policy/mwresources](http://www.ramblers.org.uk/Campaigns+Policy/mwresources).

Grid squares were chosen at random, subject to certain considerations. Background mapping was used to show how many squares in each authority were already taken. This meant that people who lived close to a highway authority boundary were assigned a square in an authority with fewer Mystery Walkers signed up, so that a broader spread of data could be gathered.



Map 1a shows the spread of Mystery Walkers across the country. Our publicity attracted few Mystery Walkers in Wales, and not enough to gather any conclusive findings. As a result, Welsh authorities have been excluded from the main set of results.

The survey is not intended to highlight particular problems faced, although walkers were encouraged to report any problems to the highway authority, but to provide an overall picture of the state of the walk that they took.

The national picture presented by this survey, based as it is on a random sample of 1690 miles of rights of way by volunteers across the country, is the most reliable one. The survey should

be taken as indicative at a local level, since large counties such as Staffordshire and Hampshire had results from over 30 mystery walkers, whereas smaller authorities such as some of the London Boroughs had results had from only 1 or 2 mystery walkers.

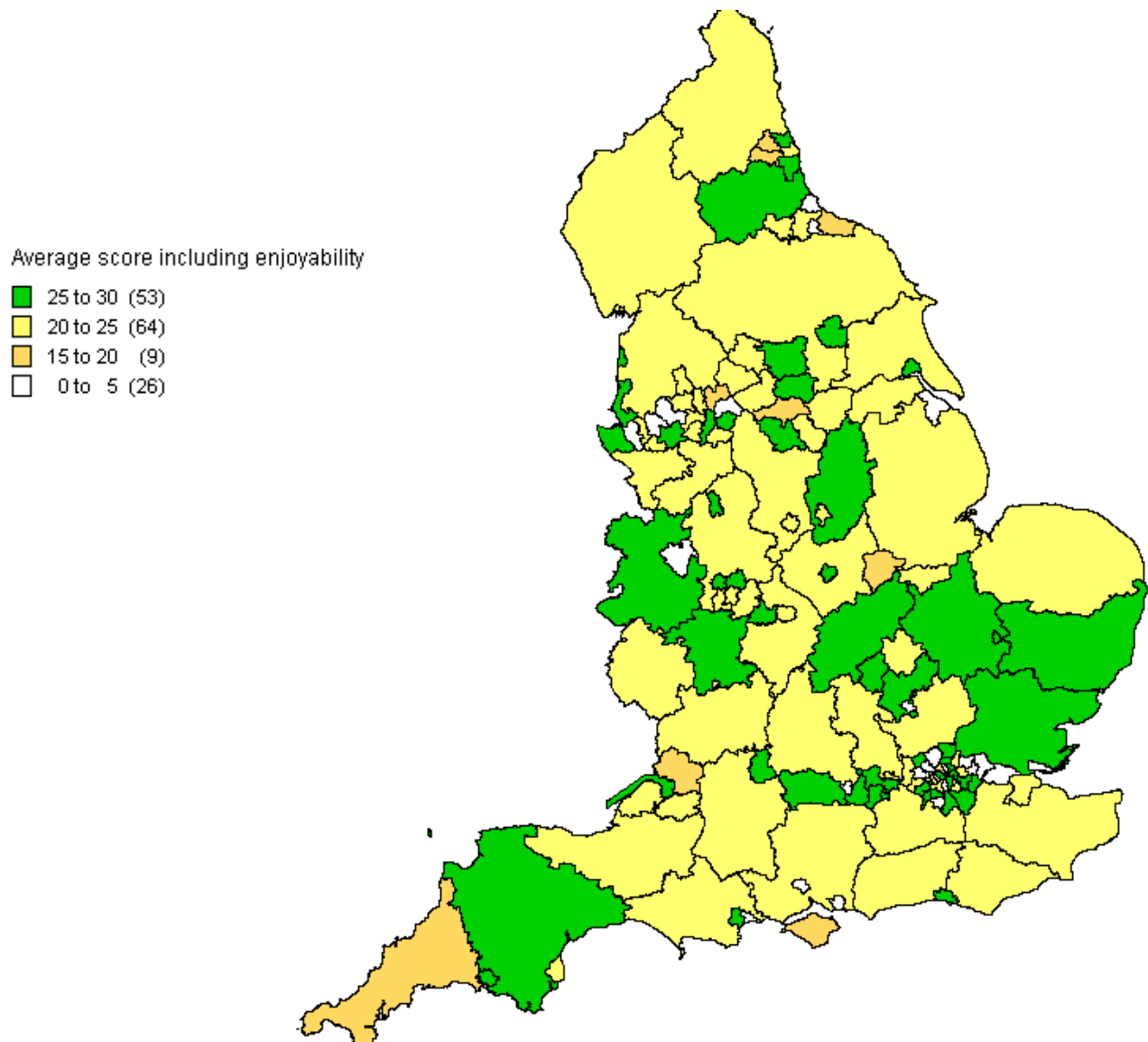
## The Results

Maps 2 and 3 show the results of surveys carried out between January 2011 and August 2011. A detailed table of these results is shown in Table 1.

As “Enjoyability” is a hugely subjective quality, we have produced two maps and sets of results – one including enjoyability and one not.

Where a Mystery Walker was wholly satisfied with their walk they would award it a maximum of 30 (or 25 if enjoyability is not included). Where a walker was wholly dissatisfied with their walk they would award it 6 (or 5 if enjoyability is not included), although no authority scored less than 15.

Map 2 – Average Score per Highway Authority including enjoyability



Map 3 – Average Score per Highway Authority excluding enjoyability

Average score excluding enjoyability

- 21 to 25 (52)
- 16.8 to 21 (64)
- 12.6 to 16.8 (9)
- 8.4 to 12.6 (1)
- 0 to 4.2 (26)

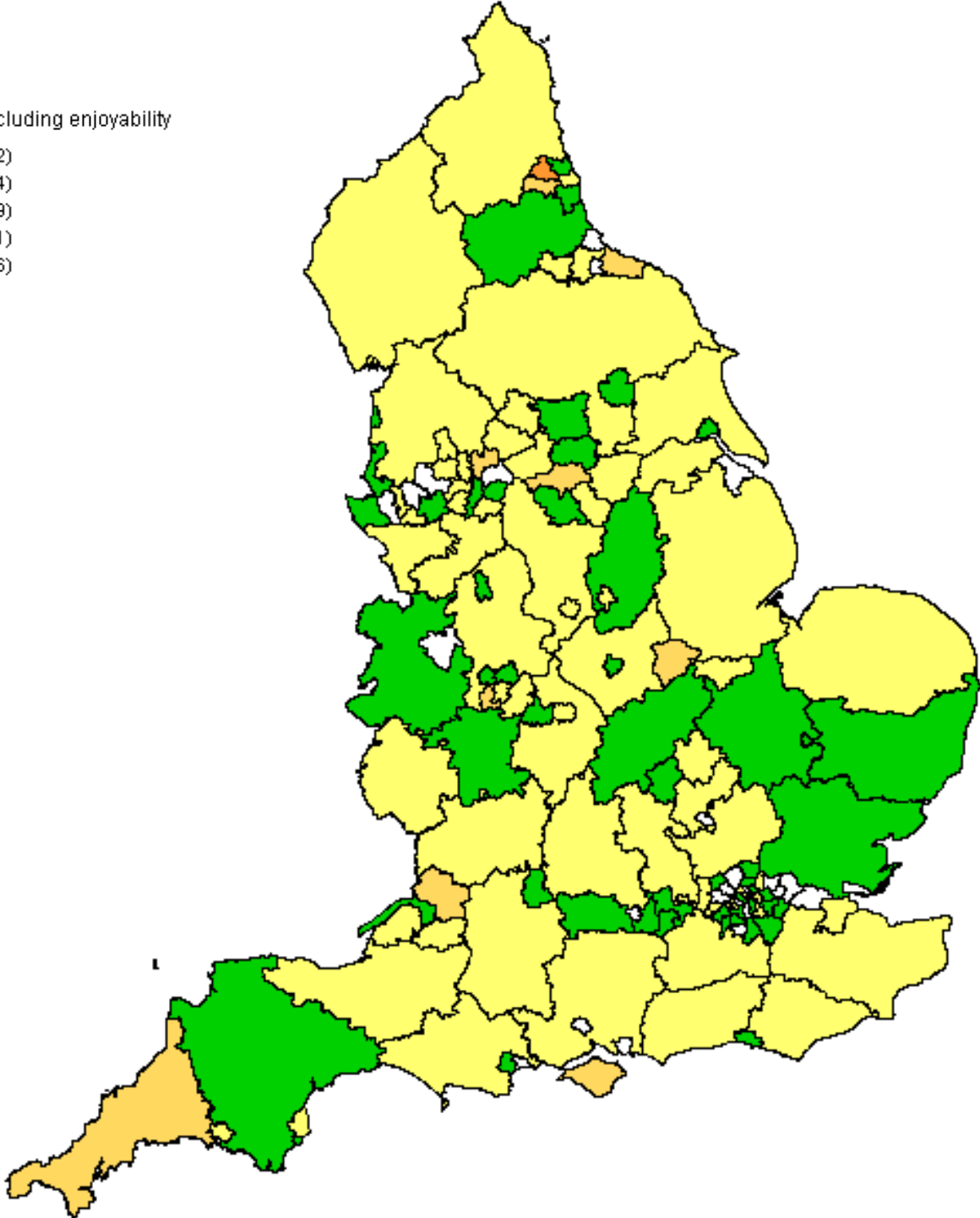


Table 1 – Mystery Walker Average Results per authority

Rank	Highway Authority	Total	Total (not inc enjoy)	Obs	Signs	Surface	Over-growth	Welcome	Enjoy
1	Wakefield District (B)	30.0	25.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
2=	City of Kingston upon Hull (B)	29.0	25.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.0
2=	Greenwich London B	29.0	25.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.0
2=	Northamptonshire County	29.0	24.0	5.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
5	Haringey London B	28.5	24.0	4.5	4.5	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.5
6 =	City of Leicester (B)	28.0	23.0	5.0	3.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
6 =	Harrow London B	28.0	23.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	5.0
6 =	Sunderland District (B)	28.0	23.5	5.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.5	4.5
6 =	Wirral District (B)	28.0	23.7	5.0	4.7	4.3	5.0	4.7	4.3
10	Tameside District (B)	27.7	23.0	5.0	4.3	4.7	4.3	4.7	4.7
11	Kingston upon Thames London B	27.5	22.5	5.0	3.5	5.0	4.0	5.0	5.0
12 =	Bexley London B	27.0	23.0	5.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	4.0
12 =	Bromley London B	27.0	22.5	4.5	4.8	4.5	4.0	4.8	4.5
12 =	Hackney London B	27.0	22.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	5.0
12 =	Manchester District (B)	27.0	22.3	4.7	4.0	4.5	4.7	4.5	4.7
12 =	North Tyneside District (B)	27.0	23.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.0
12 =	Richmond upon Thames London B	27.0	22.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	5.0
12 =	Shropshire	27.0	22.0	4.5	4.3	4.3	4.3	4.8	5.0
12 =	Southwark London B	27.0	22.0	5.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
20	Sheffield District (B)	26.9	22.2	4.8	4.2	4.4	4.4	4.4	4.7
21	Milton Keynes (B)	26.8	22.5	4.8	4.3	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.3
22	Windsor and Maidenhead (B)	26.3	22.1	4.7	4.3	4.4	4.3	4.4	4.1
23 =	Blackpool (B)	26.0	22.0	5.0	3.5	5.0	4.5	4.0	4.0
23 =	City of Wolverhampton District (B)	26.0	22.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.0
23 =	Croydon London B	26.0	22.0	4.5	3.5	4.5	4.5	5.0	4.0
23 =	Enfield London B	26.0	22.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	5.0	4.0
23 =	Merton London B	26.0	24.0	5.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	2.0
23 =	Sefton District (B)	26.0	21.7	4.7	4.0	4.3	4.0	4.7	4.3

23 =	Walsall District (B)	26.0	21.0	4.0	4.5	4.5	3.5	4.5	5.0
23 =	York (B)	26.0	22.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.5	4.5	4.0
31 =	County Durham	25.8	21.3	4.5	4.0	4.2	4.5	4.2	4.5
31 =	Suffolk County	25.8	21.3	4.3	4.3	3.9	4.3	4.4	4.6
33 =	Cambridgeshire County	25.7	21.3	4.7	3.8	4.3	4.3	4.2	4.4
33 =	City of Stoke-on-Trent (B)	25.7	21.3	4.7	3.7	4.7	4.3	4.0	4.3
33 =	Wokingham	25.7	21.5	4.7	4.3	4.0	4.2	4.3	4.2
36	Worcestershire County	25.6	21.2	4.0	3.8	4.4	4.2	4.8	4.4
37 =	Bracknell Forest (B)	25.5	21.5	3.5	4.0	5.0	4.5	4.5	4.0
37 =	Devon County	25.5	21.2	4.5	4.0	4.0	4.4	4.2	4.3
37 =	Solihull District (B)	25.5	21.4	4.4	3.9	4.5	4.4	4.2	4.1
40 =	Nottinghamshire County	25.4	21.1	4.2	4.1	4.1	4.4	4.3	4.3
40 =	Leeds District (B)	25.4	21.3	4.5	4.2	4.4	4.3	4.0	4.1
42	Central Bedfordshire	25.3	20.5	4.5	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.8
43 =	City and County of the City of London	25.0	21.0	5.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	4.0
43 =	City of Bristol (B)	25.0	21.0	4.3	3.7	4.3	4.3	4.3	4.0
43 =	City of Plymouth (B)	25.0	20.0	5.0	1.0	5.0	4.0	5.0	5.0
43 =	City of Westminster London B	25.0	21.0	5.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	4.0
43 =	Poole (B)	25.0	21.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.0
43 =	Swindon (B)	25.0	21.0	5.0	3.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.0
43 =	The City of Brighton and Hove (B)	25.0	21.0	5.0	2.5	4.0	4.5	5.0	4.0
43 =	Tower Hamlets London B	25.0	20.5	4.5	3.5	4.0	4.0	4.5	4.5
43 =	Warrington (B)	25.0	22.0	5.0	4.5	4.0	4.5	4.0	3.0
43 =	West Berkshire	25.0	21.0	4.7	3.7	3.7	4.3	4.7	4.0
53 =	West Sussex County	24.9	20.4	4.2	4.1	3.4	4.3	4.4	4.5
53 =	Dorset County	24.9	20.7	4.4	3.8	4.0	4.2	4.4	4.2
53 =	Essex County	24.9	20.6	4.3	3.7	4.0	4.5	4.1	4.3
56	Medway (B)	24.8	20.0	5.0	3.5	4.5	3.5	3.5	4.8
57	Kirklees District (B)	24.7	20.2	4.7	3.8	3.9	3.9	4.0	4.4
58 =	Birmingham District (B)	24.6	20.8	4.6	3.8	4.4	4.2	3.8	3.8
58 =	Hertfordshire County	24.6	20.5	4.3	3.9	3.9	4.3	4.1	4.1
60 =	Leicestershire County	24.5	20.6	4.5	4.3	3.9	3.8	4.2	3.9
60 =	Wandsworth London B	24.5	21.0	4.0	3.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	3.5
60 =	Cheshire East (B)	24.5	20.2	4.3	3.8	3.9	4.1	4.1	4.3
63	Bradford District (B)	24.4	19.8	4.3	3.9	3.9	3.8	3.9	4.6
64	Buckinghamshire	24.3	19.8	4.1	4.2	3.8	3.6	4.1	4.5

	County								
65	Surrey County	24.2	20.0	4.6	3.4	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.2
66 =	East Sussex County	24.0	19.9	4.1	3.6	4.0	4.0	4.1	4.1
66 =	Halton (B)	24.0	19.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.0	4.0	5.0
66 =	Hampshire County	24.0	19.9	4.4	3.5	3.8	4.3	3.8	4.1
66 =	Hillingdon London B	24.0	20.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.0	4.0
66 =	Lewisham London B	24.0	20.0	4.3	3.5	4.5	4.3	3.5	4.0
66 =	Northumberland	24.0	20.0	4.7	4.0	3.3	3.3	4.7	4.0
66 =	Torbay (B)	24.0	19.0	5.0	3.0	4.0	3.0	4.0	5.0
66 =	Newham London B	24.0	21.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.0
66 =	Oxfordshire County	24.0	19.9	4.2	3.4	4.1	4.2	4.0	4.1
75	Bath and North East Somerset	23.8	19.7	4.3	3.2	3.7	4.3	4.2	4.2
76	Warwickshire County	23.7	19.6	4.0	3.8	4.0	3.7	4.1	4.1
77	East Riding of Yorkshire	23.6	19.6	4.4	3.0	3.6	4.6	4.0	4.0
78	Sandwell District (B)	23.2	18.8	4.6	2.4	4.2	3.8	3.8	4.4
79	Somerset County	23.1	19.1	4.1	3.8	3.7	3.6	3.8	4.0
80 =	Bedford (B)	23.0	20.0	4.0	3.5	4.0	4.5	4.0	3.0
80 =	Camden London B	23.0	20.0	5.0	2.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	3.0
80 =	Cheshire West and Chester (B)	23.0	19.0	4.0	5.0	3.0	4.0	3.0	4.0
80 =	Hounslow London B	23.0	19.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.0	4.0
80 =	North Lincolnshire (B)	23.0	18.5	4.0	4.0	3.0	3.5	4.0	4.5
80 =	Rotherham District (B)	23.0	18.5	3.5	3.5	3.0	4.0	4.5	4.5
86	Staffordshire County	22.8	18.9	4.2	3.3	4.0	3.7	3.8	3.8
87 =	Calderdale District (B)	22.5	18.8	4.0	3.8	4.0	3.3	3.8	3.8
87 =	Coventry District (B)	22.5	18.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	4.0	4.0	4.0
87 =	Knowsley District (B)	22.5	18.5	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.5	3.0	4.0
87 =	North Yorkshire County	22.5	18.3	3.7	3.3	3.4	3.5	4.4	4.1
91 =	Norfolk County	22.3	18.5	3.9	3.3	4.1	3.7	3.5	3.8
91 =	Cumbria County	22.3	18.4	3.9	3.1	3.2	4.3	3.8	3.9
93	Wiltshire	22.1	18.1	3.8	3.3	3.6	3.6	3.8	3.9
94 =	Bolton District (B)	22.0	18.5	4.5	3.5	3.5	4.0	3.0	3.5
94 =	City of PeterBugh (B)	22.0	18.0	4.0	4.0	3.0	3.0	4.0	4.0
94 =	Hammersmith and Fulham London B	22.0	19.0	2.0	3.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	3.0
94 =	Slough (B)	22.0	19.0	4.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	3.0	3.0
94 =	Waltham Forest London B	22.0	17.0	5.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	5.0
99	Lancashire County	21.9	17.9	3.9	3.2	3.6	3.5	3.8	4.0
100 =	County of Herefordshire	21.8	17.9	3.3	3.4	4.4	3.4	3.5	3.9

100 =	Stockport District (B)	21.8	18.3	4.3	3.4	3.4	3.8	3.5	3.5
102	Bury District (B)	21.7	18.0	3.7	3.3	3.3	3.7	4.0	3.7
103	North Somerset	21.5	18.0	3.5	3.5	3.0	4.0	4.0	3.5
104	Trafford District (B)	21.4	18.0	4.0	4.0	3.6	3.4	3.0	3.4
105	Blackburn with Darwen (B)	21.3	17.7	3.7	3.3	3.3	3.7	3.7	3.7
106	Derbyshire County	21.1	17.5	3.5	3.2	3.5	3.7	3.6	3.6
107=	City of Derby (B)	21.0	18.0	4.5	3.0	4.0	3.5	3.0	3.0
107=	Doncaster District (B)	21.0	17.5	4.5	2.5	3.0	4.0	3.5	3.5
107=	Gloucestershire County	21.0	17.3	3.7	2.8	3.6	3.7	3.5	3.7
107=	Salford District (B)	21.0	17.0	5.0	2.0	3.0	3.0	4.0	4.0
107=	South Tyneside District (B)	21.0	18.0	4.0	3.0	4.0	4.0	3.0	3.0
112	Kent County	20.9	17.3	3.9	3.0	3.6	3.5	3.2	3.6
113	Darlington (B)	20.6	17.4	3.8	3.1	3.4	3.4	3.8	3.3
114	Dudley District (B)	20.5	16.5	4.5	3.0	3.5	2.0	3.5	4.0
115	Lincolnshire County	20.4	16.9	3.1	3.4	3.3	3.5	3.6	3.5
116=	City of Nottingham (B)	20.0	17.0	4.0	2.0	4.0	4.0	3.0	3.0
116=	Stockton-on-Tees (B)	20.0	17.0	4.0	2.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.0
118=	Cornwall	19.8	16.4	3.4	2.8	3.3	3.5	3.4	3.3
118 =	Isle of Wight	19.8	15.8	3.3	2.8	3.0	3.3	3.5	4.0
120=	Barnsley District (B)	19.0	16.0	5.0	2.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
120=	Gateshead District (B)	19.0	16.0	3.0	3.0	3.3	3.3	3.3	3.0
120=	Rutland	19.0	16.0	4.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
120=	South Gloucestershire	19.0	16.1	3.1	3.3	3.3	3.3	3.1	2.9
124	Redcar and Cleveland (B)	18.3	14.8	2.3	3.0	3.0	3.3	3.3	3.5
125	Rochdale District (B)	16.3	13.7	3.0	2.7	2.7	2.7	2.7	2.7
126	Newcastle upon Tyne District (B)	15.0	12.0	2.0	2.0	3.0	2.0	3.0	3.0

Table 2 – Highway authorities where no squares were surveyed:

Barking and Dagenham London B
Barnet London B
Bournemouth (B)
Brent London B
City of Portsmouth (B)
City of Southampton (B)
Ealing London B
Hartlepool (B)
Havering London B
Islington London B
Kensington and Chelsea London B
Lambeth London B
Liverpool District (B)
Luton (B)
Middlesbrough (B)
North East Lincolnshire (B)
Oldham District (B)
Reading (B)
Redbridge London B
Southend-on-Sea (B)
St. Helens District (B)
Sutton London B
Telford and Wrekin (B)
Thurrock (B)
Wigan District (B)

## Conclusion

Very encouragingly, our Mystery Walkers report that paths in England are in a very good condition, with an average score of 23.9 out of 30 (or 20 out of 25 excluding enjoyability) (80%). 20% of the authorities included in the survey scored over 90%.

## The best and worst authorities

The results showed that good walks can be enjoyed all around the country.

High praise should go to the staff responsible for rights of way in Wakefield, as it scored 100% in all of the surveys undertaken.

Bringing up the rear, but still scoring 50% or above, are:

**Table 3 – The lowest scoring authorities**

<b>County</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Excluding enjoyability</b>	<b>Percentage exc enj</b>
Redcar and Cleveland (B)	18.3	61%	14.8	59.2%
Rochdale District (B)	16.3	54.3%	13.7	54.8%
Newcastle upon Tyne District (B)	15.0	50%	12.0	48%

## Categories

While it would be desirable for all authorities to score 5 out of 5 in all categories (“very good”), and it is certainly right to praise authorities that did score 5 in any category, as they provide an excellent service to walkers. It is necessary to look at authorities which have scored less than 3 (“satisfactory”) in any category as they are failing in their statutory duties. The good news is that the majority of authorities scored 3 or more in all of the categories, and that over 85% of authorities scored a “satisfactory” or higher score in all categories.

**Table 4 – Categorical Breakdown**

	Obstructions	Waymarking	Surface	Overgrowth	Welcome	Enjoyability
Average Score per category	4.3	3.59	3.98	4.04	4.05	3.99
% of authorities to score more than 3 per category	97	88	99	97	99	97

## Obstructions<sup>4</sup>

It is the highway authority's responsibility to make sure that rights of way are unobstructed; indeed, a highway authority can be taken to court (under Section 130A-130D of the Highways Act 1980) if it does not secure the removal of an obstruction from a right of way. Over 97% of authorities scored an average of 3 or higher ("there were some obstructions on the walk but they did not interfere with the walk as a whole". Three authorities (Hammersmith and Fulham, Redcar and Cleveland and Newcastle upon Tyne) scored less than 3 ("some parts of the walk were virtually impassable due to the nature of the obstructions faced").

## Signposting and Waymarking<sup>5</sup>

Previous surveys conducted by the Countryside Commission/Agency found that while some authorities managed to have over 95% of paths in good condition, they were not "easy to find" or "easy to follow", i.e. it was signposting and waymarking that prevented them from reaching the national target. Signposting and waymarking was again the category that many authorities scored the lowest in – 12% of authorities scored less than 3 ("there were some places on the walk where signposts/or waymarks were needed, but on the whole it was quite easy to follow"). One authority (Plymouth) scored an average of 1 ("impossible to follow the route even with a map").

## Surface Conditions<sup>6</sup>

As with obstructions, it is the legal duty of the highway authority to make sure that the surface of a right of way is in good condition and they can be taken to court if it is not (under Section 56 of the Highways Act 1980). 99% of highway authorities achieved an average score of 3 or above ("some difficult to walk through sections but they did not interfere with the walk as a whole"). Only one (Rochdale) scored less than 3.

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<sup>4</sup> By 'obstructions' we mean 'man-made' things like dangerous stiles; paths which have been ploughed or cropped without reinstatement of the route; missing bridges; unopenable gates; strategically-placed muck-heaps.

<sup>5</sup> We recognise that the level of waymarking needed will vary from path to path, and according to the type of landscape: nobody wants too much signage, and well-trodden paths may not need any; but less-frequented paths may benefit from more signposting. Signage in and around farmyards and other buildings is especially useful. Clear waymarking where a map has become out of date is especially helpful, for example, following the diversion of a path, or where the terrain has changed through construction of buildings or removal of hedgerows.

<sup>6</sup> Again, we recognise that to a certain extent it is necessary to take the countryside as one finds it; in the winter and after rain an unsurfaced path is likely to be muddy. However, it should still be possible to make an assessment of the surface of the path by considering why it is in a particular condition. A surface that is difficult to walk along because of poor drainage or because it has been churned by vehicles should be graded.

### Overgrowth and Undergrowth<sup>7</sup>

While dealt with by different sections of legislation (overgrowth counts as obstruction whereas undergrowth is connected with maintenance), there are again elements of the law that can ensure that the council maintains the level of undergrowth and overgrowth of paths. 97% of authorities scored an average of 3 or above (some difficult to walk through sections but they did not interfere with the walk as a whole). Rochdale, Newcastle and Dudley were the only authorities to have a lower than satisfactory score.

### Level of “Welcome”

While there is no clear statutory duty for highway authorities to make walkers feel “welcome” on a walk, it is the duty of the highway authority to “assert and protect the use of the way” (Section 130 (1) Highways Act 1980). This means that they should protect against things that may deter people from using a right of way such as misleading notices, aggressive landowners and intimidating animals. 99% of authorities scored over 3 in this category, with Rochdale being the only exception.

### Enjoyability

We asked a final question of Mystery Walkers: “How much did you enjoy your walk?” It was interesting to assess how much the condition of the path affects walkers’ enjoyment of the walk as a whole. As you can see, the two maps are almost identical, showing that there is a link between how good the network is and how much people enjoy their walk. 97% of authorities scored 3 or more in this category, with the least “enjoyable” places to walk being South Gloucestershire, Merton and Rochdale. However, the fact that not all of the bottom 3 have appeared in the bottom 3 in other categories shows that there may be other things that affect walkers’ enjoyment that highway authorities cannot alter – issues such as landscape, weather or even the company! It could be argued that with so many people using walking as a way to get out and explore the natural environment, highway authorities should do what they can to make it as good and easy as possible for people to enjoy their walk – by removing obstructions and addressing problems connected with surface condition, undergrowth and overgrowth, and signposting and waymarking. The results show that on the whole, highway authorities are doing an excellent job of addressing these issues, and as a result people are exploring the natural environment more. They should keep it up!

The 2000 Countryside Agency survey found that one of the key factors that affect the condition of paths is investment. The Ramblers has campaigned for years to increase investment in the rights of way network, and has achieved success in many areas. This investment in rights of way is one of the main reasons why the results show how good the network is at the moment.

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<sup>7</sup> Whether or not the path is overgrown with naturally-occurring growth, This is not concerned with crops but with briars, nettles, hedges and other plants which are not normally purposely planted, either growing out of the surface of the path or growing out from the hedge-line alongside the path.

There never was a more appropriate time to continue with that kind of investment. We know the health-benefits of walking, and the refreshment of spirit that it brings. We know the environmental benefits, and that getting people walking for leisure can also get them to make more practical journeys on foot too – to work, school, the shops – instead of in their cars. We know the economic benefits, and how rural pubs and hotels and shops and the like thrive on the walkers' purses. Rights-of-way staff know these things too.

But now, in a time of cuts to local authority budgets, where rights of way budgets in places such as Rochdale, somewhere that scores near the bottom of the table in every category, are being cut by 50%, it is predicted the network will deteriorate.

Under-resourcing to the threatened degree will stem the progress and shunt us back to the bad old days as well as draining staff morale and damaging their undoubted commitment. The Ramblers want councillors to know the recreational value and healthful benefits of walking, its popularity, and its role in an integrated system of transport, and to wake up to its accredited major contribution to the economy, and they should allocate proper resources.

The Mystery Walker project is a rolling project. Results will be produced regularly. This survey, taken just before the cuts started to bite, shows a network which gives the public real enjoyment and the benefit of healthy exercise for all ages. Half the adult population visits the natural environment at least once a week, but it is a resource which can only be used if it is looked after on a regular basis. It is vital to keep this resource open and usable. The report will give a good opportunity to assess how the funding cuts affect the condition of paths, and it will provide potential grounds for lobbying for future investment. The Ramblers congratulates those highway authorities who continue to show an enlightened and supportive attitude to their paths and will be watching those that do not.

If you would like to sign up to be a Mystery Walker to help shape the next set of results please visit - [www.ramblers.org.uk/Campaigns+Policy/registerinterest.htm](http://www.ramblers.org.uk/Campaigns+Policy/registerinterest.htm)

For any questions about the Mystery Walker survey please email [mystery.walker@ramblers.org.uk](mailto:mystery.walker@ramblers.org.uk)