



ramblers
at the heart of walking

Ramblers report on the reduction of funding for rights of way in England

October 2012



Summary

The Ramblers is increasingly concerned that cuts to funding for rights of way are damaging people's ability to enjoy the outdoors as well as having a negative impact upon tourism, the economy and the nation's physical and mental health. The charity used a freedom of information request¹ to research the exact scale of the cuts.

Main findings include: nearly 70% of councils have cut their rights of way budgets over the last 3 years, and 41% of councils have cut their budgets by more than 20%.

In the current economic climate and knowing that government has reduced the central funding for local authorities by 10% over the last 3 years, it was not expected that rights of way would escape their fair share of funding cuts. However, these statistics provide proof that rights of way, and the teams which look after them, are being disproportionately affected by council funding cuts – with a large proportion of councils reducing funds for rights of way by more than 20%, and 11% of councils reducing funding by more than half.

Not only are these cuts having a negative impact upon recreation, health and the economy but the short-sighted nature of the cuts means that many councils will have to pay more in the long run.

As paths become more impenetrable and stiles more overgrown, people will stop walking them and the lower foot-fall will exacerbate the problem. The eventual long-term clearance and maintenance bill will be far greater than the cost if these problems were tackled now. Highway authorities have a duty to maintain paths, and by making such drastic cuts they also risk landowners and users being forced to take costly legal action to solve the issues.

Path problems will lead to people deviating round obstructions, as the law allows, walking where landowners may not wish and even losing their way; it will lead to people being discouraged from the healthy-lifestyle habit of walking; and it could lead to a potential increase in deaths on the roads as walkers are forced to walk more on roads which are increasingly unsafe for pedestrians.

Keeping paths clear is a small cost compared to the huge benefits they can bring to tourism, the economy and the nation's health and happiness and it is vital that councils properly invest in them.

Councils of Concern

Outlined below are the councils across the country which have made the worst cuts in terms of funding for rights of way and/or staffing for the period 2009–2012.²

Councils

Council	Reason
Shropshire County Council	Cut both funding and staff numbers by more than 40%, axing £410,137 from the rights of way budget and losing more than 11 members of staff.
Warwickshire County Council	Cut both funding and staff numbers by more than 50%, axing £317,706 from the rights of way budget.
Lincolnshire County Council	Cut the rights of way budget by nearly 1/3 and cut staffing by 38%, losing more than 14 members of staff.
Gloucestershire County Council	Cut rights of way funding by a 1/3, axing £337,904 from the budget, and cut staffing by 45%.
Norfolk County Council	Cut rights of way funding by 69% – a cut of £312,838.
Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council	Cut rights of way funding by 58% and staffing by 2/3rds – losing 6 members of staff.
Hertfordshire County Council	Cut the rights of way budget by £940,027 and let 3 members of staff go.
Medway Council	Cut rights of way budget by 77%.
Redcar and Cleveland Council	Cut rights of way funding by more than 50% and cut staffing by more than 75%.
Bury Metropolitan Borough Council	Cut funding for rights of way by 75% and reduced staffing by 25%
Cumbria County Council	Cut £394,000 from the right of way budget and let 5 members of staff go.

The spread of these councils covers diverse regions of the country, including areas which are popular tourist destinations for walkers such as Cumbria and Shropshire. Such drastic cuts in terms of both funding and staffing levels is having a real impact on the ground, with paths becoming overgrown, stiles, gates and bridges falling into disrepair, and people being deterred from going for a walk.

Ramblers key concerns

Health

Blocking access will reduce people's ability to get outside and get active. In a year which has seen the country energised by sport there is a great opportunity to encourage people to get more active, but in order to create a lasting legacy of increased physical activity there needs to be facilities in place which people can access easily.

Rights of way are an important resource in helping people to get outside and get active for little cost. Whether for walking, running or cycling it is vital that paths are kept clear. With obesity and obesity-related illnesses on the rise and 1 in 4 people suffering from mental health problems each year, we should be doing more, not less, to encourage low cost exercise which can be accessed by a large majority of people, making them feel both happier and healthier.

Economy

With walking as one of the nation's favourite pastimes, a well-maintained path network can attract tourists and be a boost for local economies. The South West Coast path is estimated to generate £307 million for the regional economy annually. Hadrian's Wall path has brought in £19 million into the communities around it since 2003 and in 2010 £7.2 billion was spent visiting the countryside.³

Keeping paths clear is a small cost compared to the economic benefits they bring to local communities and such drastic cuts are short-sighted at a time when many rural economies are suffering.

Volunteering

The Ramblers has groups of volunteers across the country who work with councils to clear back overgrowth and put up signs. Cuts to rights of way teams not only mean there are less funds in place for path clearance, but importantly that there are fewer staff to co-ordinate volunteers and liaise with landowners, making it harder for volunteering even to take place.

By cutting down on staff resource, many councils are drastically reducing the amount of path maintenance work which can be done, both by paid staff and by volunteers.

Recreation

Over 9 million adults in England walk for recreation at least once a month.⁴ Local rights of way are an important facility enabling people to get outside, reconnect with nature, spend quality time with loved ones, clear their head, spot wildlife, revisit history and explore the beautiful cities and countryside which England has to offer.

Cuts to rights of way will lead to poor quality paths, preventing or discouraging large swathes of the population from enjoying one of their favourite pastimes.

Case Studies

Lancashire

In the last two years the number of paths which have become overgrown, been blocked or fallen into disrepair in Lancashire has more than doubled – as council cuts start to bite.

Lancashire County Council Rights of Way team was badly affected by council cuts: losing 7 members of staff and having its budget slashed by over a third. Since the cuts, the number of outstanding path problems has more than doubled, from 790 to 1583; and the number of problems taking over 2 years to solve has trebled.⁵

Norfolk

Norfolk County Council has made cuts of nearly 70% to their rights of way budget and has ceased all regular cutting duties to clear back overgrown footpaths. With Norfolk experiencing both a warm and wet summer, paths are more overgrown than normal and with no cutting happening paths are quickly becoming unwalkable. People are becoming increasingly put off walking by the impenetrability of the footpaths. This means that the usual regular walking which helps to keep footpaths clear isn't happening – making the situation even worse. If this continues there will be serious problems for Norfolk's walking infrastructure – with all the knock-on ill-effects on the local economy and people's health.

Volunteering

There was recently a case in Essex where the council hired a contractor to clear paths rather than let volunteers do the work (on the basis that they would need to pay a rights of way officer to supervise the volunteers anyway). Half way through the contractors went bust, were unable to complete the work they'd been paid for, leaving the path in a worse state, and Ramblers volunteers had to step in and do the work after all.

Appendix

1. The Freedom of Information request sent to councils in England was:

How much money has X Council allocated to carrying out its statutory duties (maintenance, signposting and waymarking, keeping paths free from obstruction, and keeping the definitive map and statement up to date) in respect of public rights of way every year since 2009?

What is the number of staff and officers employed for undertaking the statutory duties of, and any other budget allocated, for maintenance, signposting and waymarking, for keeping paths free from obstruction, and keeping the definitive map and statement up to date for each year since 2009?

2. We have data for 111 out of the 118 councils with responsibility for rights of way in England for the period 2009–2012. Where the 2012 data was unavailable, we used the 2009–2011 figures.

The Ramblers currently has no figures for:

- Blackpool
- Bracknell Forest
- Hampshire
- North Tyneside
- Portsmouth
- Trafford
- Warrington

Of the 111 councils we have data for:

- 77/111 councils have cut their budgets (69% of all councils). A further 12 councils have kept their budgets the same.
- 45/111 councils have cut their budget by more than 20% (41% of all councils).
- 24/111 councils have cut their budget by more than a third (22% of all councils).
- 12/111 councils have cut their budgets by 50% or more (11% of all councils).

- Both revenue and capital funding were included in the figures.

- Our 'Councils of Concern' were selected by those councils which had a combination of the following: 1) the worst cuts by real amount 2) the worst percentage funding cuts 3) the biggest decrease in the number of staff working for a rights of way team 4) the biggest percentage decrease in staffing for a rights of way team. The top 10 councils which had made the greatest cuts in each of these categories were ranked, in order, with a score of 10 being given to the council cutting the most, 9 to the council cutting the next most and so on, until all councils had been allocated a number down to 1. The scores for the 4 categories were then added together and the councils with the highest scores were included in our 'Councils of Concern' list.

- Under this system Peterborough City Council would have been included in the 'Councils of Concern' because they reduced their staffing levels by 100%.

However, as this was only in fact a reduction from 1 to 0 and they have actually slightly increased their rights of way budget, it was felt that the 100% unfairly skewed the results and so they have been discounted.

Top 10 worst councils (in actual amount cut)

Council	Amount cut
Hertfordshire County Council	-£940,027
Shropshire Council	-£410,137
Cumbria County Council	-£394,000
Cheshire West and Chester	-£387,025
Gloucestershire County Council	-£337,904
Warwickshire County Council	-£317,706
Norfolk County Council	-£312,838
Lincolnshire County Council	-£288,000
Kent County Council	-£266,000
Lancashire County Council	-£259,874

Top 10 worst councils (percentage cut)

Council	% cut in funding
Medway Council	-75.96%
Bury Metropolitan Borough Council	-75.00%
Norfolk County Council	-69.00%
Staffordshire County Council	-67.14%
South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council	-66.36%
Salford City Council	-66.33%
Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council	-60.00%
Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council	-60.00%
Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council	-57.95%
Warwickshire County Council	-54.71%

Top 10 worst councils (in percentage cut to staffing)

Council	% cut in staffing
Peterborough City Council	-100%
Redcar and Cleveland	-75%
Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council	-67%
Wigan Metropolitan Borough	-67%
Warwickshire County Council	-53%
Darlington Borough Council	-50%
Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council	-50%
Manchester City Council	-50%
Southampton City Council	-50%
Walsall Borough Council	-48%

Top 10 worst councils (actual cut to staff numbers)

Council	Amount staff cut
Lincolnshire County Council	-14.50
Shropshire Council	-11.08
Gloucestershire County Council	-8.50
Warwickshire County Council	-8.00
Nottinghamshire County Council	-7.00
Lancashire County Council	-7.00
Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council	-6.00
Cambridgeshire County Council	-6.00
Cumbria County Council	-5.00
Surrey County Council	-4.00

3. Economic value of paths and visits to the countryside:
Sources: Economic Impact Study and Trail User Analysis, Natural England, 2003-2007 <http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/HadriansWall/downloads.asp?Pageld=191>

South West Coast Path National Trail – A framework for action 2007-2012.
<http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/southwestcoastpath>

Natural England. Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment
Results of the 2010 – 2011 survey

4. 9.1million adults in England walk recreationally for at least 30 minutes in four weeks
– Sport England 2009a *Active People Survey 2007/08: Individual sports participation*
5. Every four months representatives of the Ramblers meet staff from Lancashire County Council, when figures are provided about recent performance. Below is a summary of the recent footpath statistics

	Jul-10	Nov-10	Mar-11	Jul-11	Nov-11	Mar-12	Jul-12
Outstanding	790	989	926	1014	1414	1218	1583
Clearances	664	671	621	456	414	748	390
New reports	667	870	566	512	772	572	662
Outstanding reports broken down by time							
0 – 8 mths	450	615	486	463	745	597	814
9 – 16 mths	157	134	168	237	266	202	293
17 – 24 mths	79	121	114	112	151	166	158
Over 24 mths	104	119	158	202	252	253	318
Total	790	989	926	1014	1414	1218	1583