

# The Big Pathwatch: The State of Our Paths Today

## Summary Report



# The challenge isn't insurmountable

Two fifths of our footpaths, bridleways and byways need improvement, some of them urgently. But thankfully the network has not yet been permanently eroded by austerity. Nowhere is the network broken, and the problems are highly localised.

## Let's work together!

Working with councils, landowners, other charities and communities, we can ensure that every right of way is well maintained by 2020. To do so, we need to do more than try to meet the statutory minimum from an ever-diminishing budget. Acting now, with focus and creativity, can help secure the network for the future.

## There are opportunities for accessing additional resources.

Linking the maintenance of the path network to creating opportunities for low cost, entry-level physical activity, investing in path maintenance can represent a public health saving, rather than a highways cost, and release new sources of income to achieve a viable, sustainable model for rights of way monitoring and maintenance.

## Most problems are fixable if we work together.

Missing signs and intrusive undergrowth are solvable problems. Walkers, landowners and civil society all have a part to play, as do the Ramblers. Councils have willing allies in the task, especially if new ways of working with volunteers can be found.

## Custodianship matters.

Paths are better where there is active custodianship. Land owners, like the Public Forest Estate, can do more to improve the rights of way on their land even further; organisations such as the National Farmers' Union and the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) can help to strengthen the case for active custodianship among their members.

**Working together, using intelligence such as the Big Pathwatch to target our efforts most effectively, we can ensure that this unique resource we have built up over centuries can continue to give value and enjoyment long into the future.**



We can ensure **every right of way** is well maintained by 2020

# Why it matters

Our rights of way - footpaths, bridleways and byways - are an invaluable asset, a network of 140,000 miles threading through town and country, connecting people and places.

Almost all of us have used this network at some time or another: as hikers, as Sunday strollers or simply to get about. Protected in law but often neglected in practice, they represent a huge potential resource.

**Not only is walking incredibly popular, it also answers some of the biggest challenges we face as a country.**



- Walking improves physical health at a relatively low cost. **Every £1 spent on a health walk scheme saves the local NHS £7.**



- **The mental health benefits of walking are huge.** Physically active people have a reduced risk of suffering from clinical depression, and regular walking improves mood, reduces anxiety, aids sleep and improves self-image.



- **Walkers support rural economies, especially through tourism.** The South West Coast Path alone is worth £436 million a year to the regional economy, supporting 9,771 jobs.



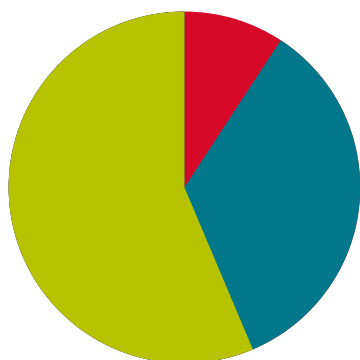
**One tenth of the network is in serious disrepair**

## The state of our paths

The infrastructure we need is already largely in place. But our paths are not always as well maintained as they should be, creating needless barriers to their enjoyment.

Never a high priority for local councils, this important asset is at risk from deep cuts to public spending.

### Path condition in England and Wales



- Poorly kept - difficult/impossible to use
- Adequately kept but improvement needed
- Well-kept and signposted

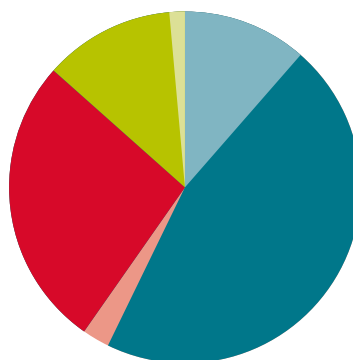
In 2015, the Ramblers set out to take stock of the current state of the path network in England and Wales in the biggest and most comprehensive survey to date. While the Big Pathwatch found over half of our footpaths, bridleways and byways to be well-kept, another third are only in adequate condition, and in need of improvement.

## Attractive views, missing signs

109,236 features were identified by the Big Pathwatch, 45 per cent of which were positive, with attractive views and welcoming people and signs the most common.

Obstructions and wayfinding were the most common negative features, with undergrowth and missing signs especially proving particularly inconvenient: **missing signs accounted for a third of all negative features.**

### Negative features in England and Wales



- Bridges, gates and stiles
- Finding your way
- Intimidating
- Obstructions
- Path surface
- Road crossing

For the most part, negative features only made walking inconvenient, not impossible: barbed wire and missing bridges or stiles were more likely to make the path unusable, while muddy or flooded paths were inconveniences in most cases. Undergrowth was more likely than a bull to stop a walker in their tracks.

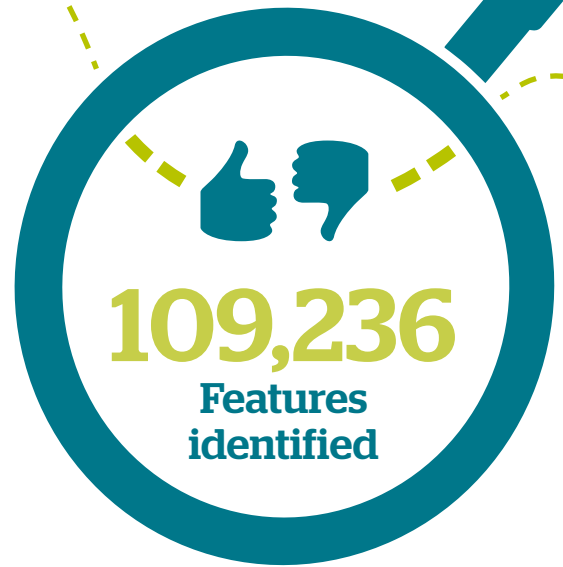


**Missing signs account for a third of all negative features**

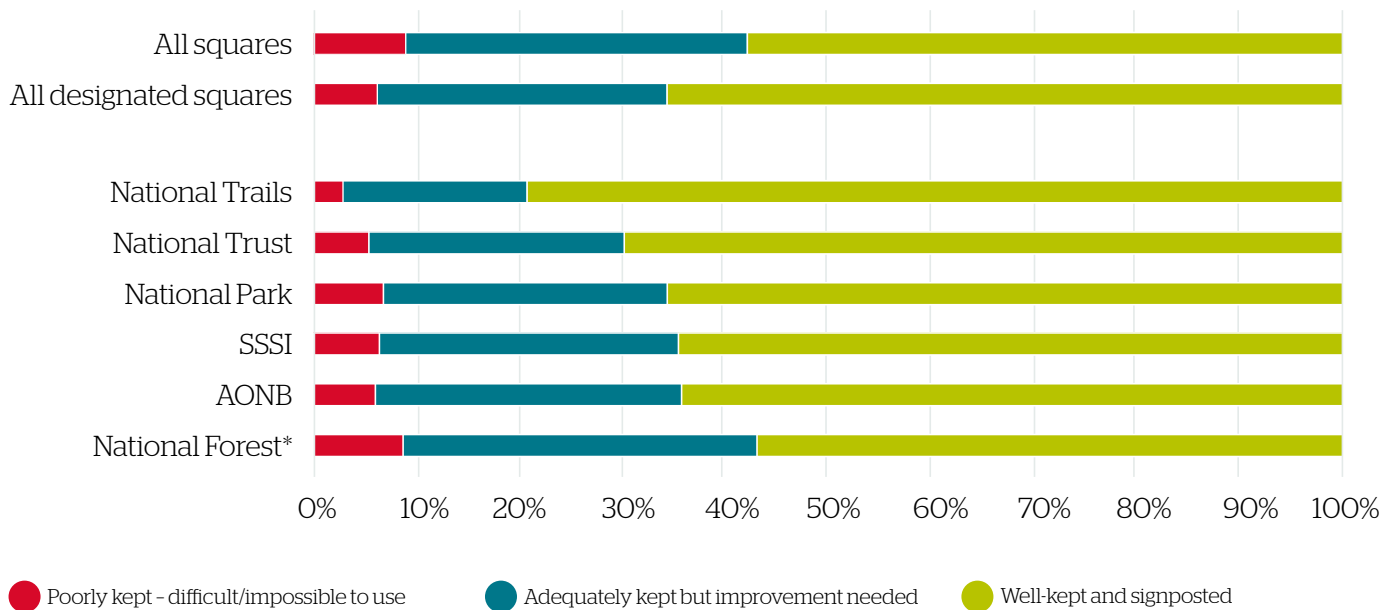
## Custodianship matters

The condition of paths varies across the country, but the picture is complex. Many local factors contribute and budget cuts alone do not explain why the path network is better maintained in some places than in others. Policy and practice matter, especially the active custodianship of land.

For example, rights of way are considerably more likely to be well-kept in areas belonging to the National Trust, when designated as National Parks, National Trails, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. These areas are also more likely to contain positive features and have fewer negative features that render paths unusable.



## Path condition by land ownership/designation



\* National Forest comprises the Public Forest Estate and the Welsh Government Woodland Estate. Contains, or is based on, information supplied by the Forestry Commission.

**Clearly, much needs to be done. The good news, however, is that the scale of the challenge is not insurmountable, provided we work together**

# Next steps

At the Ramblers, we know that Britain's paths are a precious and valuable network. We want to make sure that everyone, everywhere has access to well maintained paths, and that everyone is doing their bit to protect our paths for generations to come – whether by reporting path problems when they find them, or directly helping to keep paths in a good condition.

We want to work with councils to ensure rights of way are a recognised and valued asset; as part of the transport infrastructure, the local economy, as a means of achieving public health objectives and a way of connecting communities with nature and promoting social cohesion.

Ramblers' volunteers already clear and maintain paths across England, and we are looking at how to build on this work.

To find out how the Ramblers can help resolve issues and promote paths in your area, please contact [pathwatch@ramblers.zendesk.com](mailto:pathwatch@ramblers.zendesk.com)

If you want to get more involved with the campaign, or find out how you can take action to protect paths locally, please contact Policy & Advocacy Support **020 7339 8554** at the Ramblers.

**For more information and to download the full *Big Pathwatch: State of Our Paths Today* report visit [www.ramblers.org.uk/bpwreport](http://www.ramblers.org.uk/bpwreport).**

## Pathwatch app



You can report path problems to the Ramblers through our website or the Pathwatch app which is available for free download. Use either and we will make sure that the relevant highway authority is aware of the issue. Where possible, we will work with highway authorities to help resolve the problems.

Find out more about the Pathwatch app at [www.ramblers.org.uk/pathwatch](http://www.ramblers.org.uk/pathwatch)