



## **Priorities for the sixth Senedd: Ramblers Cymru response**

Ramblers Cymru are the guardians of the path network in Wales.

We want to see a nation where walking is at the heart of every community, where high quality networks or paths and routes connect people to each other and to heritage and nature. Good quality green infrastructure and accessible green spaces are part of the solution for tackling poor physical and mental health and can engage people in tackling the nature and climate emergencies.

### **Ministerial Priorities**

Since the start of the Covid pandemic, many people are appreciating more than ever the mental and physical health benefits of access to the outdoors, and how Wales' landscape enriches us all. It is disappointing to see that the statement of the Minister and Deputy Ministers' priorities for the next 12-18 months does not refer to their responsibilities for access to the countryside, coast and rights of way; Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or National Parks. The absence of any indication of intentions under this portfolio responsibility is regrettable, as Ramblers Cymru believe that we need a green recovery which harnesses people's enthusiasm for the outdoors and nature. This should include Ministerial commitments to ensuring people are educated about safe and responsible access to the outdoors, and support for infrastructure and projects to enable access.

#### *1. Tree planting*

The tree-planting priority, outlined by the Minister's letter, must be taken forward in a way which is sensitive and respectful of existing public access, and delivers new opportunities for community paths in woodlands. Tree planting and related fencing can occur in ways which block or restrict existing paths and access, creating enforcement and maintenance issues for the local highways authorities who have responsibility for the rights of way network. The committee should help oversight this ambitious tree-planting priority to ensure it doesn't have adverse impacts on path accessibility and place further burdens on local authority rights of way teams.

## 2. *Transport*

The Minister's letter to the CCEI Committee references place-making and decarbonisation in relation to the work to be taken forward under the Wales Transport Strategy. We would urge the committee to press the case that rights of way – our most historic highway network and a traditional means of carbon-free travel – are given due regard for their contribution to decarbonisation and the creation of liveable, accessible places. This must include fairer funding (*see Section 4*). Recent years have seen increasing investment in establishing Active Travel networks, now equivalent to £24 per person. Ramblers Cymru wish to see rights of way investment equivalent to at least 10% of Active Travel levels, so we can realise the huge benefits this established but under-valued network offers.

### **Committee Priorities**

Our route to post-pandemic recovery as a nation must help connect people with our environment, to be active on foot, and to cherish and enhance our green spaces. The CCEI Committee should prioritise exploring how Wales can achieve the sustained and meaningful reconnection of people to nature and the outdoors.

The Committee has an important role to play in the following areas:

## 3. *Access reform*

Since 2015, Welsh Government have been consulting on options for reform of Access laws in Wales, with a view to improving opportunities for more people to take part in active recreation, and to streamline the administration of related legislation.

The latest stage of this process, the Access Reform Programme, led by NRW, worked through Expert groups of stakeholders to produce a report recommending how to take forward many of the ideas for reform, including:

- expanding access to Coast and Cliffs under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act
- expanding shared use on rights of way
- Providing improved public mapping of paths and access opportunities
- Changes to the way access improvements are planned

The Report was submitted in June 2021 is currently being considered by the Minister for Climate Change. The CCEI Committee may wish to enquire about the timescales for the Minister's response to this important and overdue set of reforms.

#### *4. Fair Funding*

The recently reinstated Access Improvement Grant from Welsh Government to Local Authorities and National Park Authorities, has provided £2m this year (£1.35m in 2019/20). While welcome, this equates to just 64p per person in Wales, and is not aligned with the benefits investment in quality access can bring. For example, in 2014 the economic value of coastal walking trips in Wales was estimated at £547m<sup>1</sup>

Local authority Rights of Way and Countryside teams have seen falling resource for many years, due to austerity and the wide-ranging pressure on local government budgets. This has been compounded by the absence of any dedicated Welsh Government improvement funding between 2017-2020, and further exacerbated by significantly increased footfall pressures brought by the pandemic.

One local authority in Wales have 1,800 unresolved issues on their path network – almost 10% of which have been outstanding for over 15 years.

This perhaps offers an opportunity to collaborate with the Local Government Committee on how Local government's legal obligations to keep recreational paths and land open is affected by historic budget pressures, and how the forthcoming Sustainable Land Management scheme may support or compound any difficulties they face when negotiating with land managers.

#### *5. Agricultural payments*

Approximately 88% of land use in Wales is agricultural, so most of our opportunities for outdoor recreation rely on access to paths and green spaces on farmed land.

Forthcoming changes to agricultural payments in Wales will have significant impact on land managers and local authorities. It will be important that the CCEI committee work closely with the Economy, Transport and Rural Affairs Committee on the scrutiny of emerging plans to be laid out in the Agriculture Bill and subordinate legislation for the Sustainable Land Management Scheme. This new Scheme, replacing Basic Payments, offers an exciting opportunity to link payments to the delivery public goods, including access and biodiversity improvements.

The CCEI Committee should consider how these reforms should enhance nature recovery by delivering green space improvements which engages people with the nature around them and encourages sustainable use of green space for recreation.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.walescoastpath.gov.uk/media/1322/wcp-visitor-survey-2014-2015-final-report-for-publication.pdf>