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Rights of way cuts – a backward step

As rights of way teams face the axe, Marilyn Meeks, president of IPROW (The Institute of Public Rights of Way and Access Management), the national organisation representing professionals working in rights of way and countryside access, warns that volunteers cannot plug the gap.



Twenty years of improving access to the countryside, safe routes to school and cycle paths could be sacrificed to the Government's savage public spending cuts.

Although the cheapest, most efficient and most environmentally friendly part of the transport network, rights of way are historically an under-valued local authority responsibility, already pared to the bone through chronic under-funding.

It's a difficult job – statutory duties and enforcement are never popular – and rights of way involve some of the most complex law and regulations in the country! To protect your rights of way, officers walk a perpetual battleground between the demands of users, landowners and politicians. That expertise could be lost in the scramble to cut public sector costs.



Last decade, in just a year, Foot and Mouth disease resulted in hundreds of miles of footpaths and bridleways being neglected and obstructed. Bereft of walkers, riders, tourists and day-visitors, rural tourism and the rural economy lost an estimated £5bn. Only then did the bureaucrats finally register the vital importance of our rights of way.

Unfortunately, memories are short and the Coalition government seems disappointingly oblivious to the value of access, displayed in the current draft White Paper, which makes little reference to countryside access. It focuses on conservation and agriculture – despite the fact that agriculture is dwarfed throughout the country by the money generated through walkers, riders and cyclists in pubs, B&Bs and other rural businesses.

I am dismayed by the exclusion of access from the political agenda. It is reflected by lack of appreciation in most highway authorities of the great value of rights of way to communities – they talk of rights of way management being “picked up” by parks teams and other departments, oblivious to the complexities and importance of the work that require specialists to deliver an efficient service.

Ramblers are well aware that the countryside is good for all of us and that ensuring an open rights of way network demands skilled input from the highway authority to avoid obstructions which occur when enforcement or maintenance are lacking.



If highway authorities lose their rights of way officers, we could see swathes of countryside being lost to walkers, riders, cyclists and tourists for years. Perhaps for good, if lack of use because of neglect is seen like Beeching’s railway closures – a point the Ramblers has made very well.

Economies do have to be made if the Coalition Government is to bring financial stability back to the country, but, cuts at any price don’t guarantee that stability. Half a century ago the closure of almost a third of the rail network failed to restore financial prosperity to the country’s rail service.



The Rambler’s campaign ‘Dead End for Walkers?’ speaks out on the potential devastation of neglecting our rights of way network. Unfortunately, while it was aimed at making decision-makers aware of the result of under-funding, it has been taken personally by rights of way officers as a slight on the profession and an accusation that they have not been doing the best possible job with limited resources. Its backlash was harsh indeed when Councillors demanded to know why their authority had been highlighted as lacking in this fashion.

In fact, the issue is not at officer level – it is that rights of way do not appear on the politicians’ agendas so funding is not available. With a more focused approach, and our common aim – to see a properly resourced functional rights of way network – I look forward to working with the Ramblers to achieve constructive improvement.

Already the highly dedicated officers in many authorities are working with volunteers like the Ramblers to carry out condition audits, waymarking, and improvements to the network.

Perhaps this is how the Big Society sees all the work being done, but common sense tells us that someone has to coordinate it, and IPROW could work with the Ramblers to enhance the capacity of efficient professional services.

Rights of way professionals provide irreplaceable legal and technical expertise. Their special skills are invaluable in resolving hundreds of disputes between land owners and users before they reach the courts. Can this be replaced by volunteer labour? I don’t think so, despite the invaluable work of many volunteers.



The answer lies in greater efficiency and I believe that together, IPROW and the Ramblers can work with government, countryside users, landowners and voluntary organisations to find a way forward that will protect rights of way and enable them to continue to provide for the wellbeing of their users and prosperity of rural communities.

Find out more about IPROW at www.iprow.co.uk
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