

ACCESS TO THE OPEN COUNTRYSIDE in England and Wales

A Response by the Institution of Environmental Sciences.

(Question 1).

In the earlier part of the century greater areas of open land were more readily accessible to the public with free facility to roam (eg. downland). The major restrictions then were to the large landed estates and working farmland. Subsequent development and extensive changes in farming have led to increasing use of former grasslands, enclosure, ploughing of rights of ways and general loss of access.

Post-war legislation has confirmed many of the rights of access which have been infringed but in our view policy enforcement has not succeeded in fully replacing those facilities. Opportunity exists for further voluntary action to restore rights of way and access routes which are notionally but not practically available. The action lies with voluntary bodies, primarily local, supported by local authorities in negotiation with landholders.

This voluntary action could and should be extended to create new access arrangements in line with the policy proposals for voluntary provision. Whilst a valuable contribution, however, we do not consider that this will give sufficient guarantee of achievement of the desired extent of increased access. Some supplementary initiatives will be required.

(Question 8)

Awareness of and publicity for the various areas of countryside which are available, will encourage public use and stimulate interest. This will help to increase pressures for voluntary action to further improve access. The wider publication of annotated maps for ramblers at the appropriate scale for walking (ie. large scale) is highly desirable. With newly introduced GIS mapping techniques this is now a much more feasible proposition.

(Questions 9 - 19)

Present statutory powers are under-utilised by local authorities, probably due to lack of resources and low priorities. It is therefore difficult to assess to what degree these powers require to be supplemented. A considerable growth in public demand supported by an active central policy are needed to improve this situation, but possibly financial assistance will also be necessary.

(Questions 20 -31)

Improved rights of access and increasing levels of usage carry responsibilities for both the authorities and the public. The environmental impact of increased usage should be assessed and a degree of control exercised to safeguard both the natural habitat and the rights of landowners, residents and existing users. The extent of controls, including those over dogs, should be agreed between the local authorities and the landowners and occupiers.

(Questions 35 - 42)

Improved access will require financial investment in signage, clearance and fencing or gates as a minimum. Whilst the use of space should be free to the public it is reasonable to expect that some part of the costs of upkeep of the access routes should be recoverable. As most people, and walkers are no exception, arrive at a starting point by car then vehicle access becomes a considerable issue. Very careful control over this aspect is needed to avoid undesirable environmental effects on the approaches to access points. It is probable that parking provision should be a major factor for local authority consideration and it is through this medium (ie. parking charges) that reasonable levels of cost can be recovered.