Cycling UK – supplementary written evidence (NER0090)

Having submitted written evidence to the committee, Cycling UK has followed the oral evidence sessions with interest. We note in particular one question that was asked of the representatives of the Ramblers Association:

Q152 Viscount Chandos: What has been the impact of government funding reductions and the continuing funding uncertainty on England’s national trails network? How does this uncertainty affect Natural England’s ability to fulfil its objective of “promoting access to the countryside and open spaces and encouraging open-air recreation”?

We wish to offer a response to this question, which complements that provided by the Ramblers. We hope it will be useful to the Committee.

National trails were formally created as “long-distance routes” under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. They were envisaged as routes on which the public should be enabled to make extensive journeys on foot or on horseback. This was later amended by the Countryside Act 1968 to extend to bicycles.

Regrettably though, this worthy aim appears not to have been fulfilled. To date, only two of our national trails – namely the South Downs Way and Pennine Bridleway – are fully open to bicycle and equestrian use. This is despite clear demand from the public for such access. Of the 11,482 respondents to Cycling UK’s 2016 ‘Rides of Way’ survey of off-road cyclists’ views and activities¹, nearly 20% had ridden the South Downs Way, while many more expressed interest-in similar long distance rural routes.

Cycling UK has been working closely with Natural England and national trails staff to improve higher rights access on several of the trails. These dialogues have identified various options for providing parallel routes and possible upgrades to address missing links. An example is the Ridgeway, whose western half is fully open to equestrian and cycle use, yet its eastern half remains punctuated by short sections of footpath.

Although these discussions have been ongoing for many years, with many promises made, concrete progress has regrettably been limited. Although officially open, the Pennine Bridleway remains uncompleted, with a six mile gap near Glossop and a complete lack of progress on completing the planned northern extension. Based on these outcomes, one could be forgiven for thinking that Natural England had given up on the aspiration for improved equestrian and cycle access to the national trails.

We believe that a dedicated effort needs to be put into improved and enhanced access to national trails for cycle and equestrian users. For too long issues that could have been solved many years ago have remained on the back burner. It is unclear how much of this is due to budget constraints, and how much is down to lack of priority and commitment to the issue. However from an advocacy and campaigning point of view, it is frustrating to see that so much effort has been expended on the development of the English coastal path (with no general policy of securing higher rights access), while projects such as the Pennine Bridleway remain unfinished.

We believe this supports the following recommendation made in our original written evidence:

B. Legislation is introduced, based on the duty provided under Section 40 NERC 2006 (Duty to conserve biodiversity) creating a new ‘sister’ duty to improve and enhance opportunities for non-motorised recreational countryside access. (We suggest that this should be subject to an equivalent of the Sandford principle).

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