

a countryside for all?

David Storey and Elizabeth Connolly report the findings of research conducted into the use of rights of way by groups deemed to be under-represented in the countryside

In recent years there has been increasing concern over the ways in which different groups in society use or – especially – do not use the countryside. Within academia, attention has been drawn to the particular difficulties faced by non-dominant groups in either living in rural areas or accessing the countryside for recreational purposes.^{1,2} Researchers have endeavoured to cast light on the ways that women, children, ethnic minority groups and those who are disabled may experience or engage with the countryside.³⁻⁹

Such concerns expressed in the academic literature were echoed at a policy level in the Government's Rural White Paper for England in 2000, which explicitly acknowledged the fact that some sections of society visited the countryside less often than others.¹⁰ Countryside recreation was seen as dominated by white, middle-aged, able-bodied people, and the White Paper highlighted the need to explore why some groups were under-represented in the use of the countryside for recreational purposes.

Following the publication of the White Paper, a Diversity Review was undertaken, with a particular focus on ethnic minority groups, people with disabilities, and young people. This review was carried out initially by the then Countryside Agency, and subsequently by Natural England, leading to a draft action plan and consultation in 2006. From this, Defra (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) produced *Outdoors For All*¹¹ in 2008, which calls for measures to better encourage diverse groups to visit the countryside.

Outdoors For All argues that wider use of the countryside can be facilitated through more information being made locally available on recreational opportunities in rural areas. It also suggests that a broadening of the spectrum of those visiting the countryside can be achieved by training those working in countryside recreation to better equip them to liaise with an increasingly diverse range of people. The overarching aim is to

embed diversity and equality principles into the planning and practice of outdoor recreation service providers, so that the needs of under-represented groups are understood and met. It is hoped to create a climate of confidence in such groups about visiting their local green spaces and venturing further afield.

Paralleling this overt focus on under-represented groups in the countryside has been a strategy of improving the Rights of Way network. Following the 2000 Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act, local authorities were required to draw up Rights of Way Improvement Plans. Among other things, there is now an onus on local authorities to take account of access issues for people with mobility problems. Individual county plans have been produced in order to provide an assessment of the adequacy of the network and to identify aims and objectives for future development and management.

As part of this process, the Countryside Service of Worcestershire County Council commissioned the Centre for Rural Research (CRR) at the University of Worcester to work with particular groups deemed to be under-represented in the countryside, exploring their attitudes towards rights of way and assessing the extent to which they did (or did not) make use of the network. Four user groups were targeted for this research:

- people with disabilities;
- young people;
- parents and young children; and
- black and minority ethnic groups.

This article outlines the key findings from the research – but before doing so an overview of the research methods is provided.

Research methods

It was felt that a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach was required in order to capture more detailed perspectives on the issues. The preferred methods used were themed

discussions or focus groups. These have become a key method of social science research, and they are seen as offering a degree of flexibility that can be used to obtain more detailed insights on the issues under investigation. The method has been successfully employed in previous research into countryside access and usage.^{12,13}

The nature of the groups allows more in-depth information to be sought, giving participants the opportunity to engage with one another in discussing the issues, to respond to the views expressed by others, and to elaborate on points made. Group interaction can also highlight tensions and the intensity of feeling on issues, and has the potential to reveal conflicting views and opinions and cast light on the contradictory and complex attitudes people may hold. The scenario allows for a more nuanced range of views than a standard questionnaire.

For the purposes of this research, groups were chosen to reflect the target populations required. Some groups were identified by the Countryside Service or the CRR team, while others were identified by contacts through a 'snowballing' effect. The selection comprised a group of people with learning difficulties together with their care workers, teenaged schoolchildren, undergraduate university students, mothers with young children, and members of ethnic minorities. All groups were located in, or in the vicinity of, the city of Worcester. The focus group meetings took place in venues and



Above

There are clearly access issues for people with mobility problems

at times suggested by the individuals or organisations concerned, in the expectation that dialogue and interaction would be enhanced in surroundings in which participants felt familiar and comfortable.

The research was conducted in accordance with accepted norms and procedures and, where necessary, consent to participate was obtained by the relevant organisations.^{14,15} Participants were

fully informed of the reasons for the research and were assured that their anonymity would be respected.

Various themes were explored within the focus groups. In broad terms these related to both general attitudes towards the countryside and more specific issues related to rights of way. While key themes were identified in advance, discussion was relatively informal and open-ended, in keeping with the ethos of focus group research.¹⁶ The themes explored ranged over general attitudes towards the countryside (including likes and dislikes); reasons for visiting (or not visiting) the countryside; and the frequency with which visits take place.

More specific discussion centred on the use of the rights of way network, including individual awareness of rights of way, frequency and regularity of use, and reasons for use or non-use of the network. Positive and negative features were discussed, as well as whether individuals or groups felt comfortable while in the countryside. Specific issues, such as safety concerns, were also explored, as well as familiarity with, ability to interpret, and usefulness of maps and signage.

Findings

From the findings it is clear that there is a degree of agreement across the groups on many issues, and indeed that the views expressed reflect those of many in the broader population. It is also the case that when research of this nature is carried out, respondents may well focus predominantly on those things they see as problematic. Nevertheless some points appear very clear.

First and foremost, some individuals have little or no interest in using countryside sites or visiting the countryside on a regular basis, regardless of any perceived barriers to use; rural recreation is simply not a pastime they enjoy. It is also obvious that some people have a greater level of countryside knowledge or awareness than others.

Overall, there is a wide range of views within the various groups surveyed. Some people are much more interested in visiting and walking in the countryside than others; some are very enthusiastic and adventurous while others are considerably less keen. For some there is little, if any, interest in walking in the countryside. This was particularly the case with the young people interviewed. Most of the schoolchildren (aged 13-14) have only a low level of interest in the countryside and see it as having little to offer them (although we need to be wary of generalising about young people, where differences in ages may correspond to significant differences in outlook, needs, and behaviour^{8,17}). Similarly, the undergraduate students felt that the countryside was more the preserve of older middle-class people than younger people like themselves. In both instances there is a perception of walking in the

countryside as something done by other groups, but not by them.

While people's usage or non-usage of rights of way may be influenced by issues of disability, age, personal circumstance, ethnicity or other factors, none of these should be seen as rigidly determining people's attitudes.

Nevertheless, specific issues emerged for some groups. For some ethnic minorities, language barriers, cultural differences and personal circumstances impact on their perception and use of rights of way. However, it should be obvious that it is important to distinguish between different ethnic groups, and in particular between some longer established groups from South Asia and newer Eastern European immigrants. Issues such as low levels of dog ownership among some ethnic minority groups mean there is one less reason for visiting the countryside.

as something of an elite activity, with practical or monetary barriers preventing ready access for some.

Regarding actions to improve usage rates among under-represented groups, it is clear that the provision of information in appropriate forms and locations is essential. This was a recurring theme across the different groups. While the County Council provides information, potential users are not always aware of this or of where to access it. Schools are one potentially useful avenue to convey a sense of what the countryside offers to ethnic minority groups, as are community centres, doctors' surgeries, libraries and ethnic food shops.

While some of those who participated in this research use rights of way for a range of leisure reasons, many see them simply as a route to get from one place to another. While some people have no difficulty understanding signage and maps,



Left

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For some groups the concept of 'leisure time' may be viewed differently. It was also felt that second- and third-generation minorities were more likely to visit the countryside, an apparent reflection of the greater extent to which they may have adopted attitudes different from those of their parents or grandparents. In addition they are less likely to have difficulties with language, and so are more able to access a wider range of information about rural recreation opportunities.

A key issue here – and one which may be particularly pertinent in the case of 'new' immigrants from Eastern Europe – is the sheer lack of time or energy to engage in such leisure pursuits. Working long hours on relatively low pay leaves little time to go walking. For many who do not own a car, accessing rural areas becomes very difficult. Viewed this way, walking in the countryside might be seen

others feel a need for simplified maps and clearer signage, indicating such things as distances in terms of journey time. This is, of course, somewhat problematic, as a realistic time for some people may be too slow or too fast for others; and there are obvious issues here in relation to people with mobility problems. For many people, walking as an activity in itself is not highly rated, and for those with disabilities, and for younger people in particular, there is an obvious need for activities or 'sights' to form a focus or reason to walk. Here, wildlife was particularly important to those with learning disabilities.

Not surprisingly, access issues were raised, particularly in respect of people with disabilities and parents with young children. Concerns included wheelchair and pushchair access, the condition of footpath surfaces, and difficulties negotiating stiles.

The occasional presence of broken glass, dog mess and litter was also raised. Ancillary amenities are an important issue for some groups, so the proximity of parking spaces and toilets may be hugely important for them. In the mother and toddler groups, some parents expressed fears over children's safety, mainly relating to traffic in those instances where footpaths cross main roads.

Conclusions

A key issue emerging from the research is the perceived need for more information, echoing one of the central recommendations of the *Outdoors For All* action plan. It also suggests the need for local authorities to liaise closely with a range of potential user groups. Within all the groups considered here, there was an expressed desire for more information to be distributed to members of the public; although some information is available, many people seemed unaware of it. This raises the question of how such information might best be disseminated to reach the greatest possible audience.

Additionally, most groups expressed the view that more explicit contact or liaison between the Countryside Service and target groups might encourage more widespread use of rights of way and the countryside more generally. Clearly the nature of that liaison would need to be tailored to the needs of specific groups. Linked to this, the idea of guided walks or managed activities was mooted. More active participation, perhaps linked to conservation projects, was one idea raised.

The findings from Worcestershire appear to dovetail with the aspirations of policy-makers, but it is important to recognise that some people have no great desire to use the countryside for recreational purposes. For others, work-life balance issues, rather than minority group status as such, may hinder their enjoyment of the countryside. Notwithstanding the recognition of clear issues specific to some groups, it is apparent that there is considerable agreement between the wishes and needs of these groups and the general population.

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Notes

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