

ATW19 Ramblers Cymru

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Cyfrifon Cyhoeddus a Gweinyddiaeth Gyhoeddus | Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee

Teithio Llesol yng Nghymru | Active Travel in Wales

Ymateb gan: Ramblers Cymru | Evidence from: Ramblers Cymru

28 March 2025

Dear Mr. Isherwood,

Active Travel in Wales

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee's inquiry into Active Travel.

Ramblers Cymru believe in walking opportunities for all, and we are committed to breaking down barriers which stop people benefiting from walking. We welcomed the enactment of the Active Travel legislation in 2013 and endeavoured to play our part in its oversight and delivery through our membership of the original Active Travel Board.

As the 2022 Cross party group report and 2024 Audit Wales report illustrate, delivery of the Active Travel Act ambitions has not been without its challenges, and we hope we can support efforts to secure better outcomes for communities across Wales.

The Active Travel Delivery plan

We have long advocated, including when we were part of the original iteration of the Active Travel Board, that the siloed approach to considering walking and cycling for 'a purpose' and recreational walking and cycling, isn't the best use of limited resources. Neither is it the best way to maximise the use of new and existing infrastructure.

The Active Travel Delivery plan exemplifies the lack of integration, or consideration of integration, with existing walking and cycling routes. This is our long-standing frustration with the delivery of active travel in Wales. The delivery plan makes no mention of the 33,000kms of rights of way already in existence, and no mention of the statutory Rights of Way Improvement Plans which each authority is obliged to produce.

It is also telling that the Welsh Government's Countryside Access Division is not mentioned in relation to and cross-departmental delivery. The management of outdoor recreational spaces are overlooked as an area for priority collaboration within Welsh government. Tackling physical inactivity is highlighted as a reason to promote active travel – but the obvious synergy with promoting active recreation as the end purpose of an active travel journey, is missing from the plan. This suggests lack of ambition for decarbonising leisure journeys and ensuring modal shift for recreation.

The lack of consideration of the existing 33,000kms of public footpaths and bridleways, noted in Future Wales and Planning Policy Wales as an existing infrastructure asset, is concerning. These existing routes could in some cases provide the missing links to enhance walking and cycling at relatively low cost, particularly between settlements.

There may also be potential for active travel routes along unmapped historic rights of way which are currently unrecorded. It is positive that the Welsh Government is committed to repealing the clauses in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000), which could have seen the introduction of a 2026 deadline for claiming such 'lost' paths using historic evidence. We would now like to see a concerted effort to legally map and protect missing paths, as part of a wider Welsh Government led strategy to promote all forms of walking and active recreation.

Improving monitoring and evaluation

The absence of robust data, monitoring and evaluation has been a source of frustration, and we welcome recent recognition of this issue Audit Wales. We would like to see a comprehensive approach to monitoring and evaluation which includes Welsh government collecting relevant data on use of both active travel infrastructure and the rights of way network by recreational walkers and others. It would be helpful to have a better understanding of how new active travel infrastructure is being used for recreational purposes as this may be useful in making the case for ongoing investment in all types of walking routes.

There has been a lack of ambition to join up investment in recreational and active travel walking, and to explore the links between the two. This may point to a lack of curiosity regarding how increasing and supporting leisure walking may encourage more active travel, and vice versa.

The way statistics on walking for active travel purposes are captured through Welsh government surveys has changed. In 2017/18 the threshold for an active travel journey on foot increased from 5 minutes to 10 minutes. The rationale for this change is not clear from the statistical reports issued by Welsh Government. It may be that the number of active travel journeys on foot are being under reported, and it would be useful to have clarity on this point.

Opportunities for improved mainstreaming of active travel considerations in wider policy and programmes

We would like to see more consideration given to how the forthcoming Sustainable Farming Scheme optional layer may offer potential for the creation of public access routes which offer safer walking, riding, and cycling on the periphery of urban areas, and in rural communities.

For example, safer routes along rural roads by creating paths which provide alternatives to busy rural roads. We saw this approach working during our Paths to Wellbeing project, when a caravan park in North Wales created a new, safe off-road route from the local village. The owners envisioned their business becoming a community hub but were facing accessibility issues due to its proximity to a fast main road with no easy access to the local footpaths. They'd put up warning signs, but ultimately wanted a safer, long-term solution. A footpath was put in place to create safe access on and off the site, connecting also with the surrounding Rights of Way and benefitting both visitors and local people, and increasing footfall to the onsite café.

Positive developments like this could be achieved through an ambitious SFS optional layer, rewarding landowners for providing safe, meaningful access. It is also vital that the SFS ensures compliance with existing access legislation as part of the Scheme rule.

Active Travel spending

The high costs of consultant-led processes, and the absence of behavior change programmes, and a lack of robust monitoring to show value for money has been a source of frustration. We welcome Audit Wales and Welsh Government's recent recognition of these issues.

While fully supportive of Wales's active travel and decarbonisation ambitions, we have been frustrated at the significant imbalance in the spending on 'purposeful' active travel routes and recreational/leisure routes. By way of comparison, over the past 4 years, the Welsh government's Access Improvement grant (for Rights of Way network enhancements) has provided just £2m annually, shared between 25 authorities, and equating to just 64p per capita per year. This is despite the importance of walking to everyday health and wellbeing, and to Wales's visitor economy – estimated to be £2.9Bn annually from day visitors alone¹.

On the ground delivery has been perceived to be focused on costly highly engineered new infrastructure, predominantly for cycling. The need of walkers who are the dominant type of active travellers can seem secondary in some instances. As we have consistently said, active travel development must take account of any intersections with existing rights of way, and improvements should be made to both as part of a joined-up scheme, and to maximise value for money. The more logical routes for walkers, often shortcuts which are unsuitable for bikes, and which may already be public footpaths, are too often overlooked. Investment has tended to focus on projects meeting shared use or cycling criteria, not the enhancing most convenient or shortest routes for walkers, who are by far the majority users.

For example, in the pictured example below the new £1m+ active travel scheme (in blue) did not include any upgrade to the existing public footpath (in red) which leads to a large housing estate. Lack of joined up thinking has left the footpath uneven and with encroaching vegetation, when onsite machinery could have made some simple improvements over the course of the active travel works.

¹ Ramblers research report (currently unpublished – available to the committee on request)



©OpenStreetMap

The spending focus often seems to have been on new infrastructure on not upgrading of existing options. Where existing rights of way were in practice being used already for both leisure and active travel journeys it has proven difficult to persuade Welsh government to allow investment through the Active Travel funding stream. This again comes back to siloed definitions – something being mapped as ‘predominately’ (but not exclusively) a leisure route would not be invested in; conversely something mapped as an active travel route (but in practice well utilised by ‘leisure’ users) would be well funded. This illustrates the problem of letting strict definitions of motivation shape delivery – in reality, people move about their communities in various ways for a multitude of purposes, and improving and enhancing their environment to facilitate this should be the overarching aim.

Transport for Wales

The role of transport for Wales in encouraging active travel for recreation is important. We hope to see initiatives to promote travel by public transport or active means to reach the public right of way network as part of the work undertaken by TFW.

In recent years, Ramblers Cymru has worked with Transport for Wales, and the Community Rail partnership in South West Wales, to devise walking routes from train stations. There is huge potential for more work in this area: for more routes designed to showcase our unique communities, developed in partnership with local people and organisations like Ramblers Cymru. We would encourage Welsh Government, through Transport for Wales, to support a nationwide programme of route development and public information linked to bus routes and train stations.

Other issues

There is potential to explore unrecorded rights of way and mis-recorded rights upon existing paths. When Definitive maps were being created after 1949, in some instances paths were missed, or incorrectly recorded as footpaths only, when they should have been mapped as bridleways. Revisiting mapping anomalies might open opportunities active travel routes that will benefit more types of users, particularly vulnerable horse riders who are currently excluded from the active travel.

Finally, we also have concerns that schemes can have a negative impact on biodiversity, where widening routes or creating infrastructure has necessitated the removal of trees or vegetation and the installation of hard nonpermeable surfaces. We would welcome more consideration of how active travel routes

can be more wildlife friendly and create more pleasant, green environments. This could include more off-setting of impact through actions such as tree planting, green verges, or wildlife-rich habitat creation. Expert advice should be sought from appropriate nature-focused organisations when undertaking active travel improvements.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R Brough', written in a cursive style.

Rebecca Brough Policy and Public Affairs Manager, Ramblers Cymru
