



29<sup>th</sup> November 2024

## Open call for evidence: Welsh Government Budget 2025/26

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your open call for evidence in advance of the 2025/26 draft budget.

### Walking and our path network

The Ramblers is Britain's largest walking charity, dedicated to ensuring that everyone can benefit from walking in nature. We work to protect, improve and expand opportunities for people to access the outdoors on foot because we know how important this is for individuals and wider society.

Good quality green infrastructure and accessible green spaces are part of the preventative solution for improving people's physical and mental health and can engage people in tackling the nature and climate emergencies. Our walking infrastructure is also crucial to our economic wellbeing, attracting visitors and holidaymakers to all corners of Wales.

***We believe Welsh government needs to make a more holistic and meaningful investment in public access and walking infrastructure.***

We would urge the committee to scrutinise whether the Welsh Government is providing appropriate and coherent support for the recreational and leisure walking network in Wales, given its important to the nation's health and visitor economy.

### The need for investment

Research by the New Economics Foundation for the Ramblers found that while the public enjoy legal rights to access nature through the public rights of way network, open access land and green spaces, in practice the infrastructure which enables the exercise of these rights has been neglected, provision is variable within and between communities and many people are unable to make use of opportunities:

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The Ramblers' Association is a registered charity (England & Wales no 1093577, Scotland no SC039799) and a company limited by guarantee, registered in England & Wales (no 4458492). Registered office: The Ramblers, c/o Bates Wells, 10 Queen St Place, London EC4R 1BE.





Barriers include:

- Inadequate provision
- Inaccessible structures (like stiles or narrow gates)
- Poor quality paths and signage,
- A lack of publicly available information, and a lack of confidence. For example our recent YouGov polling found that 1 in 4 people simply do not know where they can walk, rising to over 1 in 3 for disabled people

## **The Welsh Government Budget**

We need the Welsh Government to provide a budget which:

### **1. Retains and increases the Access Improvement Grant**

The Access Improvement Grant from Welsh Government to Local Authorities and National Park Authorities is a vital investment in our access infrastructure. This fund should be retained and enhanced.

Over recent years it has remained at low levels - just £2m 2024/25. While welcome, this equates to just 64p per person in Wales, which is not reflective of the health, wellbeing and economic benefits investment in quality access can bring. Our 2023 research report<sup>i</sup> identified our path networks as having an estimated wellbeing value of over £33 per person in England and Wales. Our recent analysis of tourism day visits estimates that £962m was spent by visitors on walking trips in Wales, and £425m by overnight walkers, much of this in rural areas.

### **2. Supports programmes and funding mechanisms to educate and engage people in the outdoors, particularly those facing the most barriers**

For example, our Paths to Wellbeing project had great successes in reconnecting people in 18 communities across Wales to their local paths, making their walking more accessible and enhancing surrounding nature. The community-led, collaborative approach has engendered a new sense of

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community ownership and pride in local surroundings. Its positive impact on participants wellbeing and its legacy of practical improvements, has demonstrated both an appetite for engagement with the outdoors and the benefits this engagement brings. Welsh government should be seeking funding mechanisms to support pan-Wales community activity which enhances people's wellbeing.

### **3. Provides scope for long-awaited Access reforms to be progressed**

It is now over 10 years since the then Minister, John Griffiths MS, announced a review of access legislation to "secure better access to the outdoors for recreation, modernise and simplify the current regulatory framework, and provide clarity and certainty over where people can go and what they can do there".

Regrettably, despite several consultations and the convening of wide-ranging expert groups, little progress on reforms has been made. This has meant that local authorities continue to be frustrated by costly and lengthy processes, and public access is frustrated by uncertainty and a lack of joined up information.

The 2025/26 budget should provide resources to progress the Access Reform agenda (especially the improvement of public information, and technical reforms to Rights of way laws) which will affect people's access to nature, and the delivery of public access duties by local authorities.

### **4. Supports NRW to deliver its public access and public education responsibilities**

Recent cuts at NRW have been of great concern, and the impact on the management of their recreational activities remains uncertain. We are greatly concerned at the potential impact on their duties to promote responsible access and educate the general public on how to enjoy the outdoors safely and appropriately.

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If you require any further information or clarification, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Rebecca Brough'.

Rebecca Brough  
Policy and Public Affairs Manager  
Ramblers Cymru

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/news/ramblers-research-reveals-wellbeing-value-our-paths>

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