

## Rights of way condition survey 2000

**The general condition of the rights of way network in England has remained unchanged from 1994 although there has been some improvement in the ease of finding and following paths.**

### Summary

In 1987, the Countryside Commission and local authorities agreed to work together towards a 'national target' for rights of way. This was that by the end of the century all rights of way in England should be:

- legally defined;
- properly maintained (easy to find, follow and use);
- well publicised.

The rights of way condition survey 2000\* measured progress towards achieving the national target. It followed on from the surveys carried out in 1988 and 1994 which had concentrated on whether paths were properly maintained. The 2000 survey assessed rights of way from the point of view of walkers, cyclists, horse riders, carriage drivers and motorists.

Generally walkers found fewer problems on the legal line of paths than other users, encountering around half as many problems per 10 km as carriage drivers did.

The 2000 survey found that no 'survey region' (single or multiple highway authority areas) had attained the national target for path maintenance. Nationally, the ease with which paths might be used was unchanged since 1994 but there had been significant improvements in the levels of signposting. Wide variation in condition between survey regions was found. A number of factors related to path condition were identified.

Under-investment was cited by the Countryside Agency as a major factor behind the poor progress towards 'easy to use' paths. The Agency estimated that more than £60 million would be required to improve the condition of the paths to the national target standard.

### Main findings

The maintenance element of the national target required that paths should be 'easy to find', 'easy to follow' and 'easy to use'. Progress towards the national target was therefore assessed using these three 'measures'.

The results for each survey region are shown by Figure 1. The top section of the table shows regions which achieved two out of three of the measures, the middle section shows regions which achieved one out of three and those regions which achieved none out of three are shown in the bottom section.

- No survey region had attained the national target.
- The 'easy to find' criteria, which stated that 95% of the signposting requirement must be met, was not attained in any region.
- Only 15% of survey regions passed both the other two criteria.

**Figure 1 The national target**

X = figure < 95%

✓ = 95% and above

Survey Region	% of paths 'easy to find'	% of paths 'easy to follow'	% of paths 'easy to use'
East Sussex	X	✓	✓
Essex	X	✓	✓
Gloucestershire	X	✓	✓
Humberside	X	✓	✓
Worcestershire	X	✓	✓
Avon	X	X	✓
Bedfordshire	X	✓	X
Berkshire	X	✓	X
Buckinghamshire	X	✓	X
Cambridgeshire	X	✓	X
Cheshire	X	✓	X
Cornwall	X	✓	X
Cumbria	X	✓	X
Derbyshire	X	X	✓
Devon	X	✓	X
Dorset	X	✓	X
Durham/Cleveland/Tyne and Wear	X	✓	X
Greater Manchester/Merseyside	X	✓	X
Hampshire/Isle of Wight	X	✓	X
Hertfordshire	X	✓	X
Lancashire	X	✓	X
Leicestershire	X	✓	X
North Yorkshire	X	✓	X
Northamptonshire	X	✓	X
Northumberland	X	✓	X
Oxfordshire	X	✓	X
Somerset	X	✓	X
Staffordshire	X	X	✓
Suffolk	X	✓	X
Warwickshire/West Midlands	X	✓	X
West Sussex	X	✓	X
West Yorkshire/South Yorkshire	X	✓	X
Wiltshire	X	X	✓
Herefordshire	X	X	X
Kent	X	X	X
Lincolnshire	X	X	X
Norfolk	X	X	X
Nottinghamshire	X	X	X
Shropshire	X	X	X
Surrey	X	X	X

**Figure 2 Practical experience of using paths (percentage usable)**

Survey Region	All
Walker %	89
Cyclist %	87
Horse rider %	89
Carriage driver %	76
Motorist* %	79

\* The term 'Motorist' is used throughout to refer to drivers of motor vehicles, including four wheel drives, motorbikes, quad bikes and scrambler bikes.

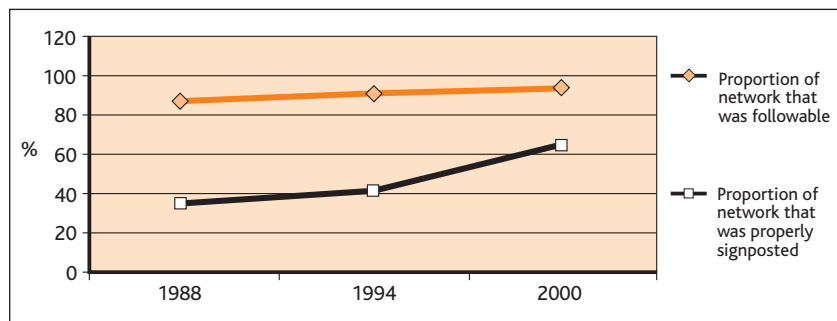
The majority of findings referred to the condition of the legal line of the paths surveyed but, for the purposes of finding out about the users' practical experiences, surveyors also assessed the overall effect of path problems allowing for minor deviations from the legal line.

- In practice, all users found more than three-quarters of the path resource to be 'usable'.
- For walkers, horse riders and cyclists, the figure was 87% or more.

Figure 2 shows the practical experience for different types of user.

Nationally there had been no significant change in how easy paths were to use since 1994. This contrasted with a steady improvement in the ease with which paths might be found and followed since 1988. The greatest change was in the level of signposting, which improved slightly between 1988 and 1994 but more significantly between 1994 and 2000.

**Figure 3 Change in ease of finding and following paths**



- Walkers, who have rights to use all types of right of way, could expect to encounter a serious problem approximately every 2 km.
- Cyclists faced a similar situation whilst horse riders could expect to find a serious problem every 2.4 km on average.
- Carriage drivers and motorists fared worst travelling an average of only 1.2 km between serious problems.

**Figure 4 Factors linked with path condition**

Importance	Factor
Important:	Path promotion
	Highway authority expenditure
	Landscape type
Less important:	Location within a protected area (National Park/AONB)
	Location within urban fringe
	Location within a Parish
	Paths Partnership or other community path scheme
	Location by the coast

Statistical analysis of a range of possible factors that affected path condition was undertaken and showed that four of these had a clear correlation with paths in good condition. These are shown in Figure 4.

- An investment of over £60 million would be required to improve the condition of paths to the standard envisaged by the national target.
- Annual maintenance costs exceed £18.5 million.

The cost estimates summarised by Figure 5 (overleaf) do not include administration, management costs or major engineering works.

## Methodology

A core condition survey of rights of way was undertaken in randomly selected survey squares by a team of surveyors. Volunteers participated in a smaller, parallel survey. The sampling strategy was designed to produce reliable data at the level of individual survey regions.

The core survey assessed the condition of 9,036 km of rights of way (4.8% of the total) within 1,019 survey squares each measuring 3 km x 3 km. A sufficient number of survey squares were selected to ensure a geographically representative spread. Survey squares were randomly selected within survey regions, which comprised single or multiple highway authority areas.

**Figure 5 Summary of cost estimates**

	Upgrade cost (£m)	Maintenance cost (£m)
Signposts	£4.75	£1.22
Crossings	£11.87	£10.71
Hazards	£52.59	£6.63
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£69.20</b>	<b>£18.55</b>

The 2000 survey demonstrated use of technology in the way the research was carried out

## Further reading

\* The rights of way condition survey 2000, 2001, Countryside Agency (CA 94)  
 \* The rights of way condition survey 2000 Hindsight report, 2001, Countryside Agency (CAX 68)  
 Rights of Way in the 21st Century, 1998, Countryside Commission (CCP 543)  
 Rights of Way in the 21st Century, conclusions and recommendations, 1999, Countryside Commission (CCP 550)  
 Resources for Public Rights of Way (1999/2000), George Keeping, Jan 2001, report for CSS Countryside Working Group/Countryside Agency

\* The rights of way condition survey was designed and managed by environmental data capture and management consultants, exeGesIS SDM Ltd, on behalf of the Countryside Agency.

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[www.countryside.gov.uk](http://www.countryside.gov.uk)

The length of paths surveyed was designed to provide statistically reliable and representative information about path condition for each survey region.

The core survey was carried out by a team of 20 surveyors. User groups participated in the preparation and delivery of a surveyor training programme designed to ensure the consistency of condition assessments.

The quality of survey data was optimised through the use of hand-held dataloggers which were able to check for errors as data was entered. The automated downloading of data directly to a central database eliminated errors that might otherwise have arisen during the manual transfer of data from paper records.

The volunteer survey made use of an interactive web-site that allowed volunteers to register their interest, select a survey area and enter survey data directly onto a survey database.

## Conclusions

The maintenance element of the national target with its 'easy to find', 'easy to follow' and 'easy to use' criteria was not attained by any survey region. This finding was consistent with the significant number of obstructions to rights of way highlighted by the results of the survey. It is important to note that although no survey region attained the national target, this might have masked the fact that some individual highway authorities might have done so. For example, the Isle of Wight highway authority declared that it had met the target in 1999.

Not all obstructions to the legal line had a significant effect on practical use. As a result, the practical experience of users was less problematic than was suggested by the national target and other results that related only to the legal line of paths.

Whilst no survey region met the 95% criteria for paths being 'easy to find' the survey showed that, over the previous six years, there had been a substantial improvement in the level of signposting. At a national level, two-thirds of the total signposting requirement had been met and this compared with 34% in 1988 and 42% in 1994. In spite of this improvement in signposting there had been negligible change in the overall ease of use for paths. Paths were easier to find than ever before but users could still expect to encounter the same level of problems along the way as they would have done in 1994.

The survey assessed the condition of paths from the viewpoint of each type of user. Walkers and cyclists could expect to encounter a serious problem approximately every 2 km on average and this increased slightly for horse riders. Carriage drivers and motorists were only able to travel about half this distance between serious problems. Walkers were the only users with access rights over the footpath network and they also benefited from the fact that their access over higher status paths, such as bridleways, was less problematic than access for other users.

There was considerable local variation in the condition of paths - the best regions had thirteen times fewer problems than the worst. The survey found evidence that the major factors corresponding to paths in good condition were high local authority expenditure, good promotion, being in a protected area (such as a National Park) and particular landscape types. This suggested that good promotional management supported by adequate investment resulted in significant improvements to the path resource.

Given that the overall condition of the path network had changed little since 1994, it was likely that the prevailing level of investment was at best maintaining an existing, inadequate condition. If investment levels reduce still further then the condition of the network may be expected to regress to pre-1994 levels.