

Ramblers Cymru: Reflections on the Welsh Government Draft Budget 2022-23

About Ramblers Cymru

Ramblers Cymru are Wales' leading walking charity, dedicated to creating a Wales where everyone can enjoy walking in the outdoors and the mental and physical benefits it brings. We are the guardians of the path network and help protect access to the places we all love to walk.

Why paths and access to green spaces matter

As a result of the COVID pandemic, many people are discovering a new appreciation of the paths and green spaces on their doorsteps, of the benefits walking brings to their health and wellbeing, and of the enjoyment to be had by being close to nature.

Our route to recovery as a nation must build healthier and happier communities. We must secure help people connect with the environment, be active on foot, and cherish our green spaces.

The Welsh Government has acknowledged the important environmental and recreational role of the public rights of way network and access to the green space, in strategies and policies such as the National development Framework, Future Wales: the National Plan 2040; Natural Resources Policy; Planning Policy Wales; and Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales.

Ramblers Cymru are calling on Welsh Government to back this recognition with fair funding.

Fair Funding for rights of way and access

The recently reinstated Access Improvement Grant from Welsh Government to Local Authorities and National Park Authorities, has provided £2m this year (£1.35m in 2019/20). While welcome, this equates to just 64p per person in Wales, and is not aligned with the benefits investment in quality access can bring. For example, in 2014 the economic value of coastal walking trips in Wales was estimated at £547m.

Local authority Rights of Way and Countryside teams have seen falling resource for many years, due to austerity and the wide-ranging pressure on local government budgets. This has been compounded by the absence of any dedicated Welsh Government improvement funding between 2017-2020, and further exacerbated by significantly increased footfall pressures brought by the pandemic.

One local authority in Wales have 1,800 unresolved issues on their path network – almost 10% of which have been outstanding for over 15 years. Another has just 38% of its paths in a satisfactory condition. Across Wales, Authorities are failing to fulfil their statutory duties to secure and maintain public access.

Paths, access and green space in the draft budget

The Climate Change Main Expenditure Group

Access to the countryside, coast, rights of way, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks all sit in the portfolio of the Minister for Climate Change.

Given the expressed recognition by Welsh Government of the role of outdoor access to a wide range of societal and economic impacts, and the declaration of nature and climate emergencies, it is of concern that the Climate Change MEG is projected to be the hardest hit both in real terms, and percentage terms at the end of this 3-year budget. In fact, it is the only MEG in a negative situation at the end of the period on percentage terms.

Budget Expenditure Lines

Because of the potential impact on paths, access, and the opportunities for people to enjoy the outdoors on foot, Ramblers Cymru would welcome the Committee examining the following budget decisions through the scrutiny process:

‘Promote and support protected landscapes, wider access to green space’

Within this Budget Expenditure line, *Landscape and Outdoor Recreation* will receive £17.4m. This is a reduction of 15% in real terms on the current budget.

The proposed capital budget element under this BEL is set at £5m per year over the 3-year period. This is a reduction from £8.9m in 2021/22.

It is not clear from the information provided if the Access Improvement Grant is part of this expenditure area, or if it is being maintained at its current level.

‘Green Infrastructure’

There is no capital budget for green infrastructure (was £1.4m in 21/22)

‘Sponsor and manage delivery bodies’

Natural Resources Wales’ budget is rising by 1%.

NRW have a vital role to play in providing and promoting responsible access to the outdoors, and have faced significant budgetary challenges over recent years. It is a concern that rising demand from increased visitors, without a meaningful increase in budget, will adversely affect the management of NRW estate, and some of our key recreational assets, like the Wales Coast Path.



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'Sports & Physical Activity' (Economy MEG)

Sport Wales is allocated a reduced budget (-2%).

As Wales recovers from the pandemic, we need more opportunities for people to increase physical activity through organised sports and recreational activities. This is key to improving mental and physical health, and reducing health inequalities. The reduction of support under this budget line could inhibit those opportunities.

Conclusion

Ramblers Cymru encourage the committee to consider the implications of the issues raised above, and to explore recommendations for how this draft budget could be strengthened to help Wales realise the benefits of paths and outdoor access for current and future generations.