

Public rights of way 2nd survey: Covid-19 impact (May 2020)

This was the 2nd survey in conjunction with the Institute of Public Rights of Way and Access Management (IPROW), following the 1st survey in early April immediately before the Easter weekend. This follow-up survey was run over the period 6th-13th May, including the early-May Bank Holiday weekend. On the evening of Sunday 10th May the Prime Minister announced some relaxation of restrictions on outdoor exercise, effective from 13th May. By then, 40 authorities had already completed the survey so it seems reasonable to assume that this relaxation had little effect on the results reported below.

The aim was to collect and share information on the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the use and management of public rights of way across England. The survey went out from Paul Newark as Chair of the ADEPT PROW Working Group via the regional leads in that network to main contacts in local authorities, and this time also to contacts in local authorities in Wales via CSS Wales.

The survey asked questions about some of the issues that had been identified informally by officers and via media coverage in some places. Questions included any changes in the level of use of rights of way, any disruption to normal PROW maintenance and enforcement service levels, evidence of any increase in tensions between landowners and walkers, and action taken to facilitate the responsible use of PROW and keeping routes open during the current emergency

There were 47 responses to the 2nd survey, as follows (previous figures in brackets):

Unitaries	20 (25)
Counties	17 (24)
National Parks	4 (6)
Wales	6 (0)
	47 (55)

Levels of use

As anticipated, most authorities reported that the use of their PROW network had increased during the during Covid-19 restrictions compared with the situation prior to 23rd March, with **91% reporting increased usage**. The proportion reporting a significant increase (of 20% or more) rose from 32% to 38%, suggesting that there may have been some continued increase in usage since early April.

There is some evidence of a reduction in the numbers of walkers in some National Parks – two of the three authorities reporting reduced usage were National Parks Authorities (the other was a county council in the Midlands).

Q1 – Level of use of rights of way:

Reduced/normal	4 (5)	9% (11%)
Some increase (up to 20%)	25 (25)	53% (57%)
Significant increase (20% or more)	18 (14)	38% (32%)
	47 (44)	

Service levels

Only four authorities reported that their PROW maintenance and enforcement services were continuing to operate normally. **The majority (72%) reported some disruption, and were limiting site visits to safety issues and blockages/closures only.** A smaller number of authorities (17%) reported more significant disruption, and had stopped all site visits and inspections. One (an urban unitary authority in the north of England) had suspended the service altogether.

Q3 – Service levels:

Normal	4 (3)	9% (7%)
Minor disruption (limited site visits)	33 (35)	72% (76%)
Major disruption (paperwork only, no site visits)	8 (7)	17% (15%)
Suspended	1 (1)	2% (2%)
	46	

By far the most common reason given for services being disrupted/reduced (68%) was a decision by the council to scale back or suspend non-essential work. PROW staff being redeployed to other essential duties during the emergency was reported more often than in the first survey. There appears to be no general problem with staff absence due to sickness or self-isolation, or with availability of contractors or materials.

Q5 – Reason for service disruption:

Contractor availability	1 (4)	3% (11%)
Materials availability	0 (1)	0% (3%)
Staff absence	1 (2)	3% (6%)
Council decision to scale back/suspend	21 (24)	68% (69%)
Staff redeployed	8 (4)	26% (11%)
	31 (35)	

In the 2nd survey we asked authorities **“are contractors/works teams still undertaking repairs to infrastructure or path surfaces?”** **72% reported that they were.** No equivalent question was asked in the 1st survey.

Q4 – Repairs:

Yes	35	72%
No	13	28%
	46	

We again asked authorities if they were still intending to provide their usual cyclical programme of vegetation clearance on rights of way. Over a half (59%) reported that they were doing so, others had reduced or suspended this maintenance work:

Q6 – Vegetation clearance:

Normal	26 (21)	59% (57%)
Reduced	14 (8)	32% (22%)
Suspended	4 (8)	9% (22%)
	44 (37)	

Enforcement/issues arising

The 1st survey found that the increased number of walkers had generated a rise in the number of enquiries and complaints to local authorities. Two thirds (67%) of the enquiries from landowners and farmers were requests for routes to be closed or diverted in order to keep walkers away. Their other enquiries were more general concerns about increased number of walkers and the perceived greater threat to the health of landowners and their families, particularly vulnerable people. On the other hand, the main complaints from walkers (68%) were that landowners were acting outside their powers by closing, blocking or diverting routes or by erecting misleading signs.

In the 2nd survey authorities were asked instead whether they are getting requests from landowners and householders to divert routes away from their premises. 91% reported that they are:

Q7 – Requests to divert routes:

Yes – many	8	17%
Yes – a few	35	74%
No	4	9%
	47	

Authorities were also asked if they had received reports of unilateral closures of routes by landowners. 87% said that they had:

Q8 – Reports of routes closed unilaterally:

Yes – many	6	13%
Yes – a few	35	74%
No	6	13%
	47	

Authorities were asked if they had allowed ‘soft diversions’ of routes via signed, permissive alternatives and if so whether they had provided signs for the alternative route. 85% said yes (up from 75% in the 1st survey):

Q11 – Soft diversions:

Yes – signage provided	17	37%
Yes – no signage provided	22	48%
No	7	15%
	46	

In the first survey, almost 90% of authorities reported an increase in tensions between landowners and members of the public since mid-March. In the second survey, authorities were asked if they were aware of any further rise in tension since early-April – responses were evenly split with 20 **(44%) saying yes a further increase**, 20 saying levels maintained, and 5 reporting a reduction.

Q17 – Increased tensions between landowners and walkers?

Increased	20	44%
Stayed the same	20	44%
Reduced	5	12%
	45	