

Brian Welch
Chairman, Ramblers Northampton Group

Dear Sir/Madam

Response to 2018/19 Budget Consultation

I write as Chairman of Ramblers Northampton in response to the consultation on the proposals for the County Council Budget for 2018/19. Ramblers Northampton has over 350 members and offers an extensive programme of walks led by volunteer leaders which make extensive use of the County's Rights of Way network. A significant proportion of its membership consists of retired people and walking has been shown to offer considerable health benefits as well as providing companionship and a general sense of well-being. The walks also use local facilities helping to keep alive shops and pubs in rural areas.

It is of concern, therefore, that the budget proposals under the heading - Reduction in Highways Maintenance (2); indicate a 'reduction in Public Right of Way technical, inspection, enforcement and operational staff levels'. This service has had its budget cut in previous years, to the extent that we understand that there is just one Rights of Way officer for each of the three areas. Therefore, if there are further cuts, we are concerned that the resulting Rights of Way team will not even be able to provide the level of service which is necessary to ensure that the network remains safe for users and that land owners comply with the legal requirements in respect of maintaining the footpath network.

The statement in Appendix A is silent on the impact these cuts will have on the service or the outputs that can be expected from the Rights of Way team should the cuts proceed. It is also not clear the extent to which Capital Expenditure on Rights of Way is affected. Ramblers Northampton believes that an on-going programme of renewals and enhancements is necessary to ensure that existing stiles and gates are provided to safe standard, ensure that signs and waymarks are replaced to maintain confidence in the use of the network, and to replace stiles with gates to make the network more accessible to all users.

The provision of an extensive, safe and reliable rights of way network can only happen through a partnership between the County Council, land owners, Parish Councils (or District Councils in urban areas) and the Ramblers. For this to happen, the County Council needs to continue to take a lead in managing Rights of Way and we trust that the proposed budget cuts will not lead to a diminution of this role.

Yours faithfully

Brian Welch