



**Planning White Paper:
An outline response from the Ramblers' Association.**

July 2007

Introduction

A key charitable aim of the Ramblers' Association is the protection and enhancement of the countryside, not just for walkers but for the benefit of the general public. For this reason we take an active interest in the planning system as a means of achieving sustainable development within environmental limits.

Promoting Walking

White Paper contents: Introductory sections of the White Paper restate government policy of encouraging development that promotes 'active travel' – such as walking and cycling – and public transport rather than car use (paras 1.41, 2.2). Major road development is identified as a priority (box 5.1) within new National Policy Statements.

Ramblers' view: Walking or cycling for short journeys improves health and fitness, and reduces traffic congestion and carbon emissions. Construction of major new roads could put parts of the cycle and rights of way networks at risk, and encourage more dependence on the private car.

Recommendation: The national cycle and rights of way networks could be considered for classification as nationally significant infrastructure, and certainly their ongoing development would benefit from a National Policy Statement.

Rights of Way

White Paper contents: It is proposed that the Planning Commission will have powers: "to amend, apply or disapply local and public legislation governing infrastructure such as railways or ports; powers to stop up or divert highways or other rights of way or navigating rights, both temporarily and permanently;" (para 5.18)

Ramblers' view: If anyone or any body wants to close a public right of way for any reason there needs to be public notification, service of notice on the prescribed bodies (a list of user organisations including the RA), a right to object and a right to have those objections heard before an independent arbitrator. The tests within the procedure should provide that a right of way cannot be extinguished unless the decision-maker is satisfied that either a reasonably convenient alternative will be provided, or that no alternative is required.

Recommendation: We are seeking clarification on whether the Planning Commission will meet these requirements, and what impact it will have on the rights of way procedures laid down in the Transport and Works Act 1992.

Landscape and Renewable Energy

White Paper contents: In conjunction with the Energy White Paper, effectively calls for the fast-tracking of major renewable energy projects in order to cut carbon emissions and achieve security of supply (paras 3.17, 5.5).

Ramblers' view: We believe it is possible to cut emissions and secure supply without damaging our most precious landscapes through the construction of very large onshore windfarms. The White Paper talks of 'balancing' national 'need' against local 'impacts'; there does not appear to be a recognition that a local impact – such as the imposition of industrial structures on a previously undeveloped landscape – could be considered of national importance.

Recommendation: Speedier reform of the Renewables Obligation, investment in new technologies, and better consultation with communities in landscapes potentially affected would make a difference, but do not seem to be forthcoming.

The Right to be Heard

White Paper contents: Many recommendations that will weaken opportunities for the public to respond to major developments, especially after the National Policy Statement phase. This includes an 'open floor' phase during the examination of a proposal that seems to replace current opportunities for the public to contribute more formally in Public Inquiries (para 5.34).

Ramblers' view: We are happy to support the coalition of environmental and civic organisations that is raising serious concerns with a range of aspects of the White Paper, especially those that remove opportunities for public participation in the planning process.

Recommendation: A right to be heard and genuine consultation with affected communities is key to successful and truly sustainable development.

Next Steps

In addition to our own submission to the consultation, we will be contributing to the detailed response and analysis from Wildlife and Countryside Link.

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