

Written evidence submitted by the British Mountaineering Council (AB28)

1 Introduction

1.1 The British Mountaineering Council (BMC) is the representative body for climbers, hill walkers and mountaineers in England and Wales with over 85,000 members who participate in a wide range of activities from hill and coastal walking to climbing, bouldering and coasteering. The BMC is a statutory consultee under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 (MCAA) and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW) as rock climbing and walking are included within these rights of access.

1.2 The BMC supports the proposal for a new agricultural policy to be underpinned by payment of public money for the provision of public goods. We welcome the public goods approach as an opportunity to deliver environmental objectives at the same time as providing farmers and land managers with a secure, long-term income stream. The UK's countryside supports rural communities and provides 'public goods' such as biodiversity, landscapes, water and soils, and is home to many of this country's most iconic species and habitats. It also provides opportunities for recreation and access, supporting our health and well-being.

1.3 A reform is essential to secure nature's recovery, help in the fight against climate change, shift towards more sustainable, humane food production and reconnect people to the outdoors. It must also dove-tail with the Environment Bill to deliver on the promise of leaving the natural environment in a better state.

2. Summary of key points

2.1 Opportunities for access must not be side-lined – The BMC welcomes Part 1 of the Agriculture Bill, New Financial Assistance, for a range of purposes. The core principle of 'public money for public goods' must be upheld to meet a number of environmental and animal welfare commitments and must encompass all of the purposes listed in Cause 1(1). In particular, Clause 1(1)(b) 'The Secretary of State may give financial assistance for or in connection with... (b) supporting public access to and enjoyment of the countryside, farmland or woodland and better understanding of the environment'. We ask that opportunities for access are not side-lined but given equal weighting in the options available to farmers to achieve wide-ranging public benefits.

2.2 Maintain our existing Rights of Way network - Financial support should be made available to landowners to ensure they fulfil their existing legal duties to keep public rights of way that cross their land clear of any obstructions and in good order.

2.3 The BMC supports amendments put forward by Greener UK, that the Bill must make it clear that receipt of public payments for public goods should be dependent on adherence to a regulatory baseline. This will ensure basic standards of agricultural practices are met relating to the protection of the environment, animal welfare and public access: landowners must be expected to maintain the rights of way across their land.

2.4 Improve and enhance public access through a more joined up Rights of Way network - There are a number of isolated parcels of open access land for instance (mapped under CROW 2000), that are impossible or difficult to legally access. The BMC believes the Agriculture Bill presents an opportunity to address some of these and formalise access arrangements with farmers in order to facilitate better, clear access to these areas and fill gaps in the path network. Examples of these are contained below.

2.5 During the passage of the Bill in the last Parliament the Ramblers proposed the amended wording below to strengthen the commitment from government that public funds be targeted towards *enhancing* public access. The BMC fully supports this suggested change.

Clause 1, page 2, line 9, leave out “supporting” and insert “enhancing”.

3. Why is better public access important?

3.1 In 2018/19 two thirds of adults spent time in ‘nature’ at least once a week and approximately 19.2 million adults have ‘walked for leisure’ in the last 28 days. Our network of footpaths and bridleways and areas of open access enable people to reconnect with nature, exercise and explore rural towns and villages. Despite the popularity of countryside visits however, in some areas our access infrastructure is fragmented and in poor condition. There is a need to effectively support and adequately reward farmers to maintain and enhance access, and to provide opportunities for business diversification around recreation and tourism.

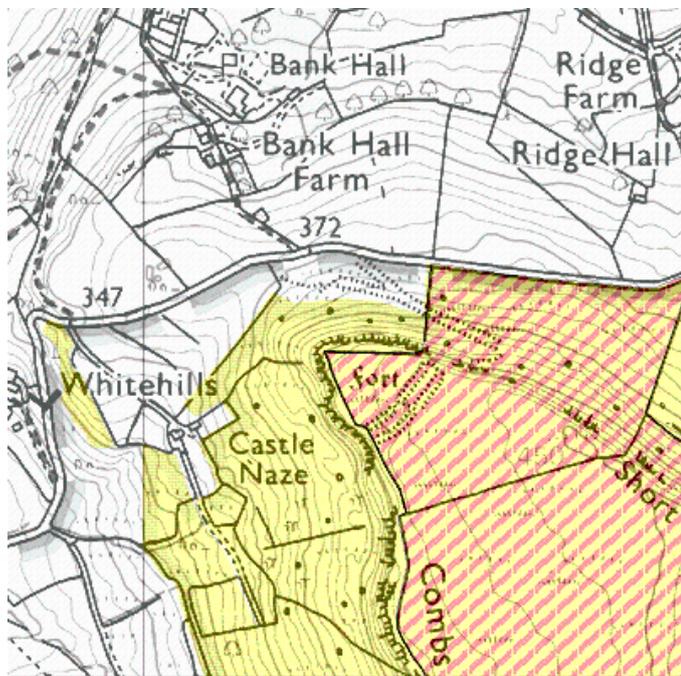
3.2 Up to 2010, permissive access over a 10-year period was an option within the Higher-Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme. Whilst some improvements were made, the access options on offer were short-term and permissive, access was not publicised sufficiently, schemes were not demand-led to provide opportunities where they were most needed (only where land managers volunteered it) and the quality of routes created varied considerably. This access option was funded by the UK Government (rather than co-funded with European funds) and was subject to cuts in the 2010 spending review.

3.3 Targeted, demand-driven permanent access provision should be an underpinning principle of future schemes to ensure value-for-money, fair provision and long-lasting public and economic benefit. Rights of Way Improvement Plans, Neighbourhood and Local Plans as well as work by the Ramblers and the BMC volunteers have already identified where such improvement should be made. In particular:

- New paths created to connect urban and rural fringes
- New paths along field margins in order to bypass roads
- New paths to help create more circular routes
- New paths to help fill in gaps and connect areas of open access with the path network (see examples below)

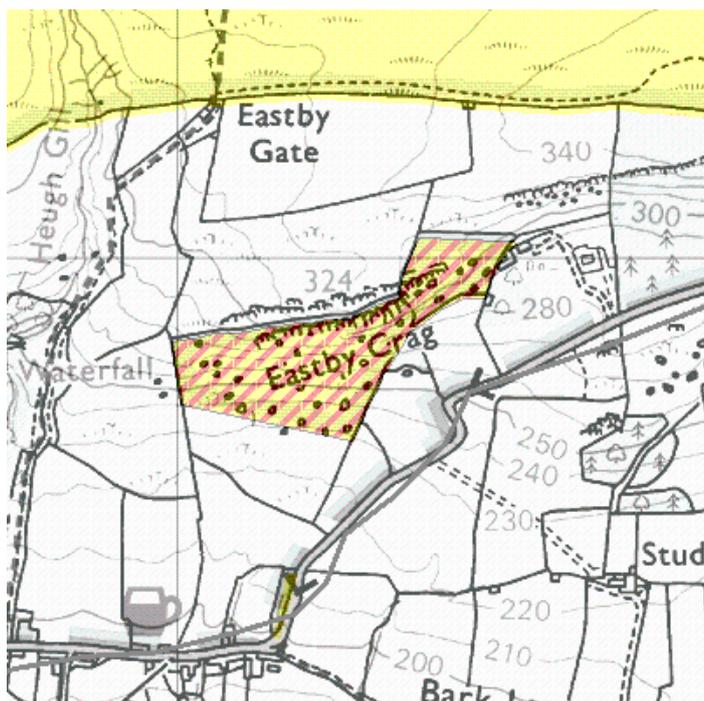
3.4 Example 1 - Castle Naze, Nr. Chapel en le Frith, Derbyshire

Currently the crag at Castle Naze in Derbyshire is not served by a PROW, and there is private land between the crag and the highway (as shown below). A voluntary access agreement exists with the farmer to enable access to the crag for climbing (a right of access for climbing exists under CROW 2000). The creation of a Right of Way here would enable a secure right of passage to the crag.



3.5 Example 2 - Eastby Crag, Eastby, Nr. Skipton

Here is an unusual case of an 'island' of open access land (CROW 2000) containing a crag. There is currently no PROW to access this and the crag is surrounded on all sides by land with no right of access. Today, access to the crag is facilitated by an agreement between the Yorkshire Dales National Park and the tenant farmer but this is an example of where the creation of a new, formal right of way would resolve this issue.



4. Conclusion

4.1 The Agriculture Bill must allow for the opportunity to maximise value for taxpayer's money and aim to deliver multiple public goods at the landscape scale and on the same parcel of land, at the same time. This must include farming and biodiversity alongside opportunities for access and enjoyment of the natural environment.

4.2 Financial support for public paths will help achieve the public access objectives in Chapter 3 of the 25 Year Environment Plan, provide a framework to improve health & well-being in the natural environment and is one of the most direct & obvious benefits to the public from public subsidies.

4.3 Future farm subsidies also present a real opportunity to improve access to our countryside and beyond, providing land managers with an income stream while helping to solve the current problems with public access i.e. the lack of connectivity of the network and poor maintenance of it.

4.4 During the passage of the Bill, the BMC is hoping for a clear commitment from government that public funds will be directed towards delivering public goods, particularly improvements in public access to the countryside for all users.

17 February 2020