



Public rights of way survey: Covid-19 impact (April 2020)

The survey was run over the two days 8th and 9th April, immediately before the Easter weekend, in conjunction with the Institute of Public Rights of Way and Access Management (IPROW). 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.

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 disruption to normal PROW service levels, reduction in vegetation clearance, changes in the level of use, 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

A press release was issued on 9th April [here](#), which generated some media coverage: [localgov](#), [LGC](#), [EJ](#). A further release will be prepared to highlight the survey results.

There were 55 responses, as follows:

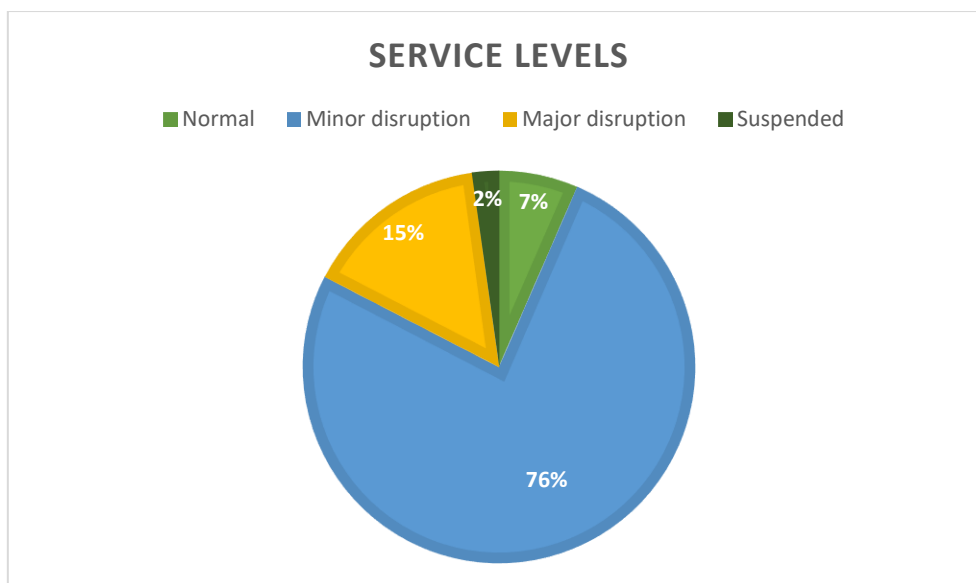
Unitaries	25
Counties	24
National Parks	6
	55

Service levels

Only 3 authorities reported that their PROW maintenance and enforcement services were continuing to operate normally. The majority reported some disruption and were limiting inspections to safety issues. Some authorities reported more significant disruption and had stopped site visits and inspections. One (a National Park Authority) had suspended the service altogether.

Service reduction:

Normal	3	7%
Minor disruption	35	76%
Major disruption	7	15%
Suspended	1	2%
	46	



By far the most common reason given for services being reduced was a decision by the council to scale back or suspend non-essential work.

Reason for service reduction:

Contractor	4	11%
Materials	1	3%
Staff absence	2	6%
Council decision	24	69%
Staff redeployed	4	11%
	35	

Over half of authorities were continuing their usual programme of clearing vegetation from routes, others had reduced or suspended this maintenance work:

Vegetation clearance:

Normal	21	57%
Reduced	8	22%
Suspended	8	22%
	37	

This will have an increasing impact as Covid-19 restrictions continue through the spring and summer, and respondents were asked to estimate the proportion of their PROW networks that might become impassable by the (indefinite) end of the period:

% network impassable?

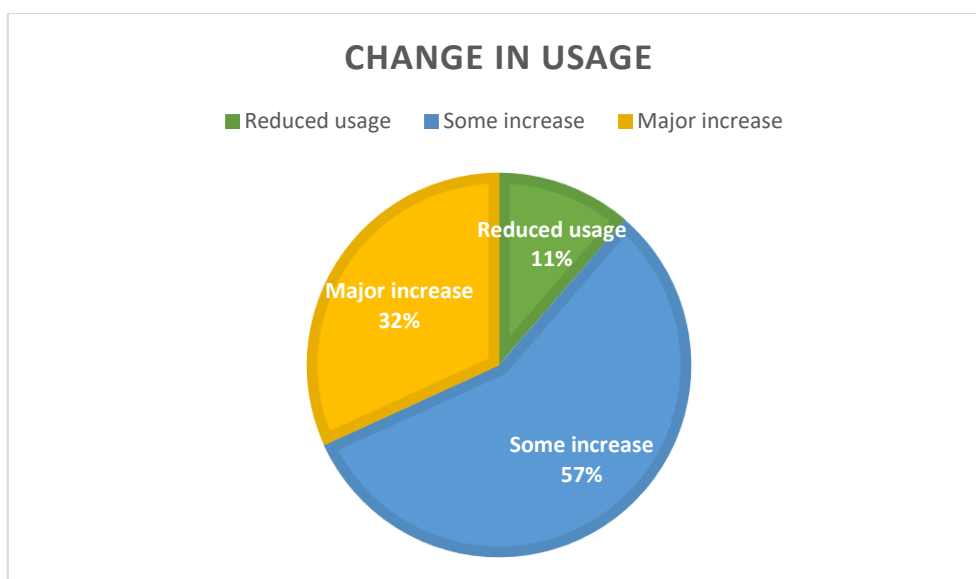
<20%	27	82%
20%-50%	4	12%
>50%	2	6%
	33	

Use of routes and issues arising

As anticipated, most authorities reported that the use of their PROW network had increased during the previous 3 weeks of Covid-19 restrictions, with a third reporting a significant increase particularly on the urban/rural fringe. Five reported some reduction in usage, these include 2 of the National Parks that responded.

Change in usage:

Reduced	5	11%
Some increase	25	57%
Major increase	14	32%
	44	



The increased number of walkers generated a rise in the number of enquiries and complaints to local authorities. Two thirds 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 were that landowners were acting outside their powers by closing, blocking or diverting routes or by erecting misleading signs.

Landowner enquiries:

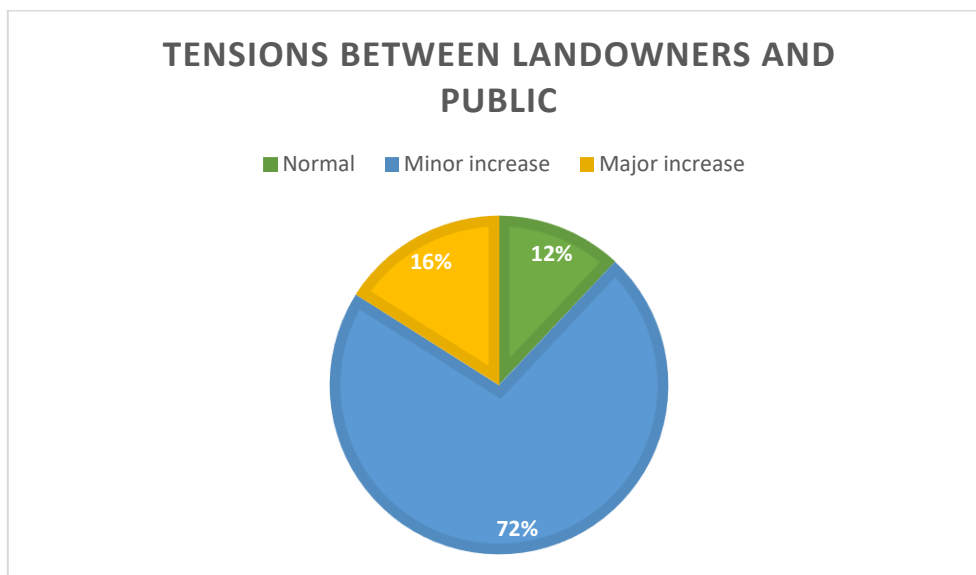
General concerns	14	33%
Closure requests	29	67%
	43	

Public enquiries:

Blocked routes	28	68%
Misleading signs	5	12%
General issues	8	20%
	41	

Tensions between landowners and public?

Normal	6	12%
Minor increase	36	72%
Major increase	8	16%
	50	



Almost 90% of authorities reported an increase in tensions between landowners and members of the public. Where unlawful route closures were reported, most authorities were seeking informal resolution by providing advice to the parties, only a small minority had resorted to formal enforcement or taking action to remove obstructions. 75% were allowing temporary 'soft' diversions to be created, subject to conditions being met. Some PROW teams reported that local Councillors were raising enquiries or making representations, often in support of landowners' requests for closures but sometimes in support of the right of the public to use the routes for exercise in line with government guidance.

Enforcement action?

None	5	11%
Informal/advice	33	73%
Enforce	6	13%
Remove blockages	1	2%
	45	

Allow soft diversions?

Yes	40	75%
No	13	25%
	53	

Councillors raising issues?

Yes	24	45%
No	29	55%
	53	

Issues raised by Councillors:

Keep paths open	7	26%
Close/divert paths	11	41%
General advice	4	15%
Close car parks	3	11%
Other	2	7%
	27	

Other issues

The survey finished with a couple more general questions about what further advice from the government would be helpful, and what innovations or different practices PROW teams had developed. There was a strong view that government had given mixed messages to date about PROW and access to the countryside/green space, with a need for more clear and consistent messaging going forward, particularly around the definition of 'local' exercise and where it is permissible (or not) to drive a short distance in order to start a walk.

Other advice needed?

Clear & consistent	25	56%
Clarify local/driving	12	27%
Responsible behaviour	5	11%
Advice to LAs	3	7%
	45	

Like many other council staff, most PROW teams are now working from home and making greater use of technology to communicate with colleagues and others. Some stressed the importance of working with their in-house Comms teams to help get messages out locally, others stressed the importance of working with stakeholders and representative groups to help resolve issues.

Different practices

Working from home	17	43%
Videoconferencing etc.	5	13%
Working with LA Comms	3	8%
Liaison with partners	6	15%
Local posters to use	7	18%
Other	2	5%
	40	