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The Countryside Code Refresh 2020/21

CPRE, The countryside charity response

Omissions

Whilst the Countryside Code is extensive, particularly the full version, we would like to highlight some omissions in how it is presented and within the content itself.

- Many of the problems arising from visits to the countryside come from too many people visiting the same 'honey pot' beauty spots. We feel one omission from the code is a reminder of the extraordinary 'ordinary' countryside nextdoor that may not be designated as a National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, but has plenty to offer. We know from CPRE's network of local groups that much countryside near London and accessible by public transport for instance, in places such as Hertfordshire/Essex borders, Ivinghoe Beacon or the Surrey Hills just to name three very special parts of the Green Belt, is often overlooked by potential visitors looking to escape the city and explore the countryside. The code could benefit from including a reminder to explore the countryside near to where people live – including Green Belt, Country Parks and Community Forests, with the added benefit that it would reduce car travel, and possibly links to where people can find guides to 'ordinary' or everyday countryside.
- It is only available in English – the code would be more accessible if it was translated into other languages, including British Sign Language (through a video), an audio translation and braille. A version in plain English with clear imagery would also improve accessibility.
- It may be helpful to make the point that many paths may include gates and stiles, and offer links as to where people can find information on wheelchair accessible routes.
- Due to Coronavirus, more people are travelling by car as avoiding public transport and this trend is likely to continue into next year. Therefore, there should be more emphasis on safe and responsible car use in the countryside as well as a reminder of opting for public transport or countryside that is accessible by foot or bicycle where possible. It might help to offer examples of the consequences of busy roads for the countryside for example, Rangers not being able to tend to areas or empty bins.

Areas of emphasis

- It could put off a lot of people from engaging with the Code as it comes across like a prescriptive list of do not do's, as it is mainly negatively framed. The Countryside Code could work better if the points are offered as helpful guidance instead. Could it for example benefit from a tagline of 'Your guide to enjoying and respecting the countryside' and include useful links for people who might need further information. For example, as mentioned above, links to where to find accessible walking routes would make it more inclusive. Tips on how to prepare for a trip to the countryside would also make it more inclusive and helpful, and could then include things like bringing a bag for your rubbish to take it home and checking the route on a map before so as to know where you can walk.
 - It might also be worthwhile to not just highlight what not to do in the countryside but to prompt people to consider how they can turn their trips to the countryside into an



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opportunity to enhance the countryside by, for example, taking part in hedgerow laying activities, picking up litter or taking part in a citizen science project.

- Although the imagery in the long Countryside Code is arty, it has little chance of resonating with people. It may work better to have pictures of people engaging in the countryside in a positive way, following best practice such as leaving gates as they find them, or taking litter home. It should also use photos that are inclusive and diverse so that people can 'see themselves' in the countryside and feel welcome.
 - This principle should also apply to any 'celebrities' who are part of the promotion of the Countryside Code in Spring, for example any advertising campaign should include public figures people can relate to such as Mya-Rose Craig, Dara MacAnulty and Dwayne Fields.
- The campaign in Spring should emphasise the helpful things and in easy to remember form e.g. posters on trains/at train stations saying 'Enjoy and respect the countryside' with a picture of someone closing a gate.
- The more imagery that can be used to emphasise best practice the more likely people are to absorb the information than lengthy rules.
- Any imagery or messaging should also attempt to strengthen the link message that the countryside is part of the wider environment (ecosystem services etc) and a crucial wildlife habitat, as well as the source of our food and recreation. We need to remind people that the countryside is a place for nature, work and play and a vital source of clean air and food.

Other thoughts

Whilst reviewing the long and short versions of the code, we began to consider broader questions and points that we wanted to raise at this stage of the consultation even if there might not be scope to explore them until the broader conversation on the code in 2021.

Key questions we were considering were who the code is for, what is its purpose and how is it received? For instance, at present it could read as a list of things that landowners want people to know but does not necessarily take into account the best way to relay that information if it is not written with the target audience in mind. If the information is there to stop people littering for instance, it is unlikely that anyone who litters in the countryside will read the code and then change their behaviour as a result.

A better way to approach the Countryside Code may be to start with the intention to enable people to enjoy and respect the countryside and working back from there by finding out what people need to do that. The famous Richard Louv quote that 'People do not protect what they do not know' would apply here and perhaps the emphasis is therefore better placed on enabling people to love and enjoy the countryside. Through this approach, active participation by a more diverse range of originations, people and activists would be central to creating an output that would actually be useful and used by people visiting the countryside.

It is unlikely that anyone who visits the countryside regularly and behaves in ways the code would deem respectful ever purposefully read and learnt the rules before one of their trips; it is more likely that the knowledge on what to do and not do in the countryside was acquired through experience and knowledge shared by family or friends. A more evidence-based approach to how knowledge of the countryside is acquired should underpin this work.

Additionally, there needs to be some way of reaching children to learn about the issues raised by Countryside Code. We understand the Scouts have materials about this, but again this would be best linked to learning through experience. If government ensured every child had the right to nature secured through residential trips being embedded in the curriculum, they would be far more likely to grow up with a knowledge of, love and respect for the countryside and therefore 'abide by the rules'. As suggested above, it should be considered whether it is still



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appropriate to call it the Countryside Code, could it be a Countryside Guide instead? There needs to be clarity about what the purpose is, what message is it sending about who 'owns' the countryside and who sets the rules.

CPRE also believes it may be important to consider if, rather than trying to cover everything, some issues relating to countryside access are communicated separately from the campaign on the code itself. For example, very specific or urgent posters about the dangers of BBQs or littering may work in key places like car parks and train stations but are unlikely to have any impact as part of a wider promotion of the Code and simply reinforce the negative framing of the Code. It may be helpful, for instance, to enquire as to the impact of campaigns like this for instance: 'Don't be a tosser' signs appear all over York in an effort to stop littering - YorkshireLive (examinerlive.co.uk).