

Cheshire East Council Draft Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2026-36

Evidence base: demand assessment

For consultation

Demand assessment

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What do we know about the use of the network?

Datasets

Unfortunately, data on the actual usage of the PROW and countryside access network is limited. In the past a number of physical people counters have been installed at fixed points to gather information on the number of people using a route over time, but these have suffered from vandalism. More recently, mobile phone data has become the preferential method of data collection due to it being sourced remotely. This data source uses anonymously tracked signals of mobile phones in to monitor location, dwell time at a site, the origin of the visitor, as well as actual numbers of visitors. However, this method of data collection comes at a cost and is not yet available on the PROW network – data for a limited number of Countryside Ranger Service sites is being gathered when required for specific purposes.

Some survey data is available when collected as part of Environmental Impact Assessments for larger development site proposals or strategic infrastructure schemes. Such information is very specific to particular paths however, and may rely on limited manual counts of usage on a particular day or more. Usage has, not surprisingly, been found to depend on the location of a particular route. For example, Public Footpath No.19 to the south east of Middlewich, was found to have no users during the course of a survey conducted on both weekday and weekend days. In contrast, Public Footpath No. 12, which forms part of circular walking route close to the town of Alsager, was found to have 348 pedestrians during a nine-day census.

The Canal & River Trust monitor use of the towpath of the Middlewich Branch of the Shropshire Union Canal in Middlewich town. Since December 2022, the average daily recorded count is 218 visits, with usage typically higher in the spring and summer months and lower in the winter months, as may be anticipated. 95% of users were pedestrians, with 5% being cyclists.

Strava's Global Heat Map¹, even when viewed at the scale usable by those without Strava accounts, shows clear evidence of routes that are popular with those recording their activities via this channel. Although there are limitations to the use of the data, when the 'hike' activity is selected, popular routes where usage is high include the promoted Nantwich Riverside Loop, the Shropshire Union Canal towpath, the Sandstone Trail, the Middlewich Branch of the Shropshire Union Canal towpath in Middlewich, Joey the Swan public open space in Wistaston, the Wheelock Rail Trail and Salt Line between Wheelock and Alsager, the Gritstone Trail and circular loops including the Macclesfield Canal towpath to the south of Congleton, the Biddulph Valley Way in Congleton, Bosley Cloud, Alderley Edge, Tatton Park, Wilmslow to Manchester Airport, the Macclesfield Canal and Middlewood Way to the

¹ www.strava.com

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north of Macclesfield and multiple routes in the Cheshire Peak District. The map is similar when the 'trail run' activity is selected.

When the 'walk' activity is selected, a denser map of popular routes is revealed, which will include the highway network in towns, as well as those used for countryside access. The Connect2 Crewe-Nantwich Greenway, a traffic-free surfaced bridleway linking the two towns, is evident.

When the 'mountain bike ride' activity is selected, the map is skewed towards the Cheshire Peak District, plus the Biddulph Valley Way and Bosley Cloud near Congleton, a circular route between Wilmslow and Manchester Airport, and multiple routes to the north of Macclesfield.

Other sources of data are available which relate to greenspaces in general, rather than specific locations. These include the Natural England People and Nature Survey² which identified that 26% of respondents spent free time outside in green and natural spaces more than twice a week, but not every day. Also noted was that 15% of respondents did so every day and 28% once or twice a week.

Sport England's Active Lives Survey³ has identified that a person's age, sex, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic group and whether they have a disability or long-term health condition are significant factors influencing a person's activity levels. Longstanding inequalities remain, with women, those from lower socio-economic groups and Black and Asian people still less likely to be active than others.

The survey also shows that where people live also impacts on activity levels, with those living in more deprived places less likely to be active than those in places that are less deprived. For example, 33.7% of residents from the most deprived places within Cheshire East report being active for less than 30 minutes a week, compared to only 20.5% of those from the least deprived areas.

Evidence on the ground

On some popular paths, vegetation being kept at bay or surface erosion can be seen as a sign of use, though not quantifiable. Some of this is visible in aerial photography, such as on Bridleway No. 4 in the Parish of Baddington which forms part of the Nantwich Riverside Loop promoted walk.

² [The People and Nature Surveys for England: Adults' Data Y5Q2 \(July 2024 - September 2024\) - GOV.UK](#)

³ [Active Lives | Sport England](#)

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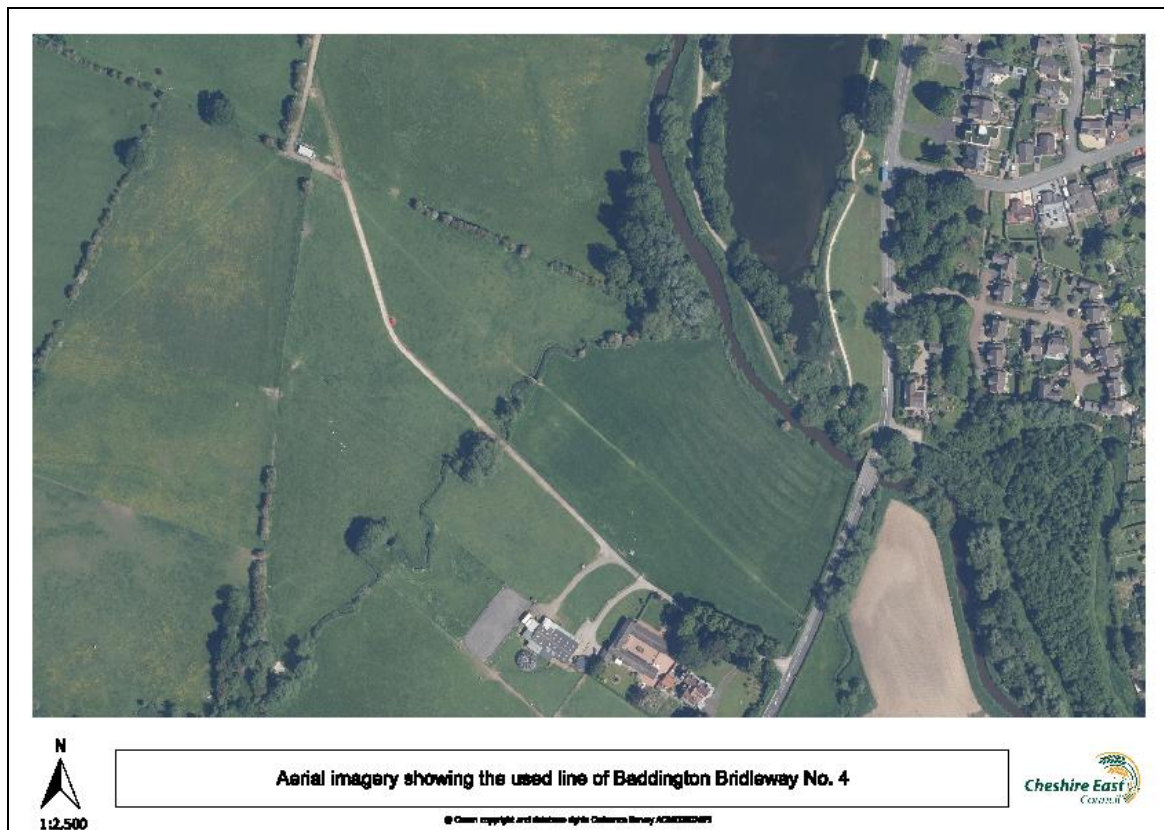


Figure 1 Aerial imagery showing the used line of a Public Right of Way

Country park usage

A limited number of physical people counters have been in operation at fixed points on Countryside Ranger Service sites across the borough. Whilst experiencing frequent issues with the validity of the data, the available results indicate that between October 2022 and October 2023, a total of 126,463 visits were made to the Biddulph Valley Way in Congleton and a similar figure to the Riverside Park in Macclesfield. It was estimated that in 2022-2023 in total over 1 million visits were made to the country parks of Cheshire East.

Again, noting limitations in the use of the data, mobile phone monitoring recorded a total number of 113,260 visits to Tegg's Nose Country Park near Macclesfield in 2024, 115,252 to Brereton Heath Local Nature Reserve between Holmes Chapel and Congleton, and 77,149 to the Salt Line near Alsager. Visits varied over the year, with the peaks in the summer months as would be expected, although this variation was only slight, indicating the usage of site by local people for whom the visits form part of their regular regimes, possibly for dog walking.

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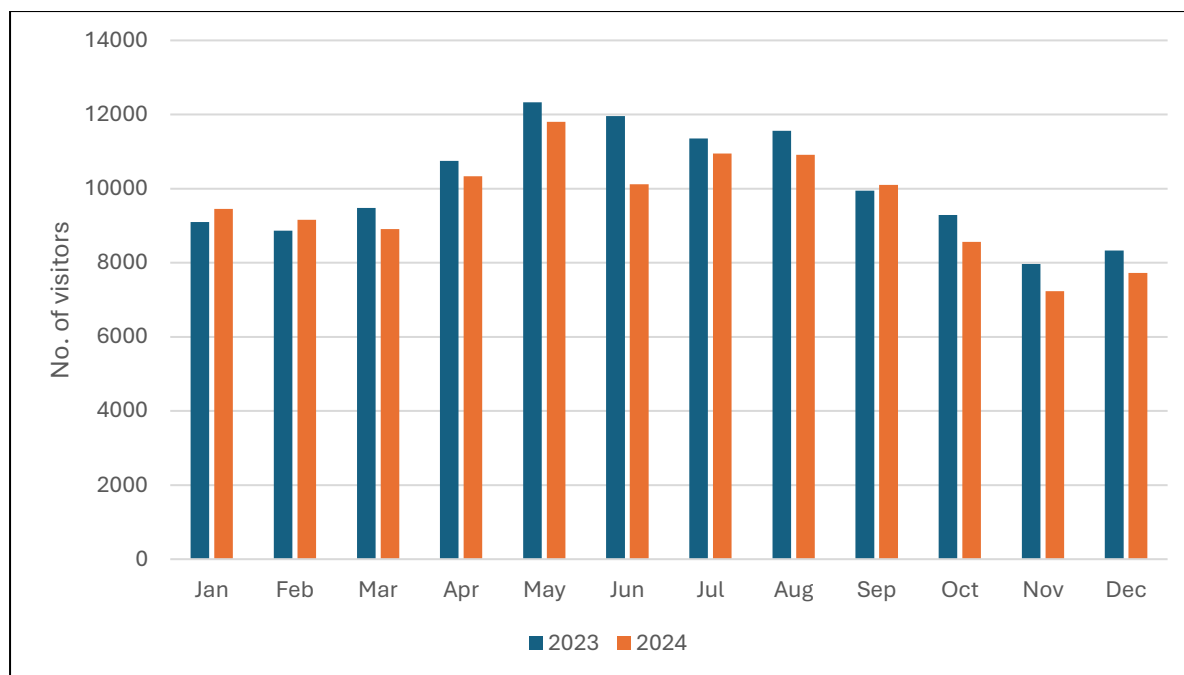


Figure 2 Numbers of visits to Brereton Heath Local Nature Reserve

Visits by means other than car to the National Trust's Lyme Park site also vary throughout the year; the data for 2024 recorded a peak of 18,014 visitors in August, and a low of 10,651 in February. On average the Trust estimates that 12,000 visitors go through the 5 main gates each month, with this monitoring including use of the Gritstone Trail promoted walking route. Again, although noting the limitations of the data for specific analysis, the figures are valuable as indicative and in identifying trends.

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Inferred usage

A de facto indicator of usage of the network may be in the form of webpage hits and route leaflet downloads. In 2024-25, there were 140,096 page views of the Countryside Ranger Service and Bollin Valley Partnership webpages. In particular, the Free Walks Leaflets page on the Council's website⁴ received nearly 30,000 views between 2020 and 2025, an average of nearly 6,000 views a year.

The free walks webpage is
"very accessible and informative"

As of March 2025, the Countryside Ranger Service had 23,475 Facebook followers, 4,954 X (formerly Twitter) followers, 1,379 Instagram followers and 3,457 email newsletter subscribers.

The promotional website Visit Chester and Cheshire hosts a number of walks in the county under the banner 'Explore the Countryside'⁵. In the year to March 2025, the page for the Gritstone Trail had 8,273 views whilst that for the Shutlingsloe walk received 13,608 views.



Figure 3 A view of Shutlingsloe hill from a footpath in Wildboarclough

⁴⁴ [Cheshire East Council Free Walks Leaflets](#)

⁵ [Visit Chester & Cheshire | Explore the Countryside](#)

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The impact of the COVID pandemic

During the lockdowns imposed under the pandemic, it was widely accepted, though largely anecdotally, that path usage increased dramatically. One dataset that is available is from Natural England's monitoring of path usage at Wybunbury Moss where they recorded a 167% increase in visits in 2020 compared to the previous year.

The National Trust, a significant owner of countryside land in Cheshire East, has seen visitor numbers to its properties, including paying visitors to historic houses, increase steadily since the end of the lockdowns, though not, as of 2023-24, as high as pre-pandemic figures. The Trust considers that rising inflation, low consumer confidence and cost-of-living pressures, especially impacting families, have influenced this trend⁶.

Tatton Park, a National Trust property managed by the Council, also comprises extensive greenspace within its boundaries. The Park saw monitored visitor numbers rise exponentially as the lockdowns were lifted, though the data does not capture those visitors who were not counted on entering the park, notably those walking, wheeling and cycling.

Estimates for pet dog ownership in the UK range from 10.6 million⁷ to 13.5 million⁸, a figure which showed a rapid increase as a result of the Covid pandemic, with about 36% of households now owning at least one dog⁸. Those dogs need exercising and many will be walked on the PROW and countryside access network around the country, a factor which exacerbated the impact of the pandemic on those paths.

This increased usage with dogs, coupled with the general increase in path usage, resulted in land managers experiencing issues including litter, trespass and dog fouling. Anecdotally, this was considered more impactful because those accessing the countryside included people who had previously not done so, and who were perhaps less aware of the working landscape in which they were exercising, and the need to do so responsibly. Such issues have continued after restrictions were lifted.

The 2024 [NFU Mutual Rural Crime Report](#)⁹ reported livestock attacks from dogs increasing nearly 30% from the previous year. This has an impact not only on the animals concerned, but an economic impact estimated at £2.4m. Another impact of irresponsible dog ownership is in the form of faeces which can cause disease in livestock and humans.

The increased usage caused path surfaces to be degraded, particularly where land managers understandably enclosed paths within fences so as to keep people and dogs within controlled areas.

⁶ [National Trust Annual Report 2024](#)

⁷ [Pet Populations - PDSA](#)

⁸ [Dog population in the UK 2024 | Statista](#), published 15th August 2024

⁹ [NFU Mutual Rural Crime Report 2024](#)

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The Natural England People and Places Survey¹⁰ asked participants about changes to their outdoor activities since the Covid lockdowns. 29% responded to say that they had been visiting local green and natural spaces more, whilst 19% said they had increased visits to such spaces further away from home. 38% stated that visiting local green and natural spaces had been even more important to their wellbeing.

“My friend I have recently been trying newer walks around the Haslington and Sandbach area. We are both in our 60s and this has been a great boost to our physical and mental health during the Coronavirus lockdown”

¹⁰ [The People and Nature Surveys for England: Adults' Data Y5Q2 \(July 2024 - September 2024\) - GOV.UK](#)

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What do we know about who is using the network?

The Natural England People and Nature Survey¹¹ identified that 70% of visits to green or blue spaces including the activity of walking, including taking a dog for a walk. 10% involved running, 6% cycling and 3% horse riding. The demand for walking routes is evident: 83 million day visits to rural locations in 2015 involved a hike¹².

However, given that we have relatively little data about the use of the PROW and countryside access network, it is not surprising that we know even less about *who* those users are.

A survey undertaken to assess use of Alsager Footpath No. 12, recorded that two thirds of walkers are using the route to walk their dog. Notably, 20% of those dog walkers had the dog off the lead, with potential impacts for livestock and other users.

Of the total number of users, 38% were children, one third of whom were accompanied by adults whilst the other two thirds were unaccompanied. 16 users were classed as 'elderly' users, with 4 as 'mobility impaired' users.

Mobile phone data for the Salt Line country park suggest that over 75% of visits were from an origin within 3-10 miles of the site, with 17% within 0-3 miles. Comparable figures for Brereton Heath Local Nature Reserve suggest that 72% of visits were from an origin within 3-10 miles of the site, with 18% within 0-3 miles. It is clear that use of the sites is predominantly by local residents, and with 61% of the population of Cheshire East living in urban areas¹³, the value of countryside access to those residents is clear.

In contrast, nearly 50% of visitors to Tegg's Nose Country Park were from an origin within 0-3 miles of the site, with 20% from within 3-10 miles and 22% from within 10-25 miles, indicating a different and wider-geographical draw to this particular site. Some visitors to the sites come from over 50 miles, presumably those visiting friends and families in the area.

¹¹ [The People and Nature Surveys for England: Adults' Data Y5Q2 \(July 2024 - September 2024\) - GOV.UK](#)

¹² [Visit Britain \(2015\) GB Day Visitor Report](#)

¹³ [Cheshire East Council Active Travel Strategy draft 2025](#)

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Barriers to use

Those not using the PROW and wider countryside access network will have many and varied reasons. Some will simply not wish to. Others may not know about the potential, The provision of information, or lack of, influences

Others still may not be able to use the networks. This may be again for a variety of reasons, including disposable income, transport, time, perception of risk, health, disability and physical barriers.

Disabled people

Estimates from the Department for Work and Pensions' Family Resources Survey¹⁴ indicate that 16.1 million people in the UK had a disability in 2022/23, representing 24% of the total population.

People with a long-term health condition or disability are twice as likely to be inactive as those without, according to NHS England¹⁵.

The prevalence of disability rises with age, and Cheshire East has a higher-than-average population aged 65 and over compared to both the North West and England¹⁶.

"I am 82 and walk a few miles every day. Before lockdown stiles were becoming a problem. I want you to know that all the new gates that are appearing are so much appreciated. Thank you so much. KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK."

The Disabled Ramblers¹⁷ identified that around 7 million people in the UK, or about 10% of the population, are unable to do a 1km walk but could do a 1km 'wheel' using a wheelchair, mobility scooter or adaptive bike, for example. They purport, therefore, that with an appropriate wheeled mobility aid these people could be '1km active'. However, they continue to note that only around 750,000 people have access to an appropriate mobility aid, thus recognising a 'chasm in provision' of 90% of those who need it not having easy access to an appropriate form of mobility aid for a 1km wheel.

Natural England's People and Nature Survey data published 26 March 2025¹⁸, covering data collected between July 2024 and September 2024, recorded that a lack of facilities and access points for those with disabilities was noted by 5% of respondents as the main reason for not spending free time outdoors in the last 14

¹⁴ [Family Resources Survey: financial year 2022 to 2023 - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁵ [NHS England » Harnessing the benefits of physical activity](#)

¹⁶ 2023 Mid-year estimates produced by Office for National Statistics

¹⁷ Not Enough Wheels to Go Round, Disabled Ramblers, 2022

¹⁸ [The People and Nature Surveys for England: Adults' Data Y5Q2 \(July 2024 - September 2024\) - GOV.UK](#)

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days. This figure has stayed relatively constant since 2020. The survey also indicated that 29% of adults in England are worried about anti-social behaviour when visiting a green or natural space.

Data about the numbers of blind and partially sighted people, as specifically identified in the legislation surrounding the ROWIP, are not available separately, but are included within the figures above.

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The potential of the network

The PROW and countryside access network of the borough form part of the wider green infrastructure of Cheshire East. The Green Infrastructure Valuation Toolkit has been used to arrive at a valuation of the benefits of green infrastructure in Cheshire East¹⁹. The health and wellbeing Gross Value Added contribution of the Green Infrastructure of Cheshire East has been estimated at £8.3m, and the other economic value at £171m. In terms of recreation and leisure, the figures have been estimated other economic value at £73.6m. The ORVal for Cheshire East, which uses the national Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment dataset to derive welfare values for green spaces, estimated the welfare value from accessible green spaces to be £78.9m per annum.²⁰

Visitor economy

Research has demonstrated that “*spending by walkers provides significant benefits to local economies in terms of income and job generation*”²¹. Walking tourism was estimated to generate up to £2.76 billion for the England Economy in 2023 and supported up to 245,500 full time jobs. It is recognised that small scale tourist businesses such as B&Bs tend to generate higher economic multipliers than national businesses, with remote rural locations also tending to have a higher multiplier effect, thereby maximising the benefits of visitor spend.

The countryside is recognised as a strength in the Cheshire and Warrington Destination Management Plan 2024-2029 as it recognises that the area is well placed to take advantage of trends in tourism, including the desire for outdoor recreation²².

The National Trust, as a major landowner of countryside in Cheshire East, aims to work with partners to deliver landscape-scale improvements in nature recovery. The Trust’s *People and Nature Thriving* strategy covering 2025-2035²³, seeks to restore nature both within and outside of its land holdings, to end unequal access to nature, beauty and history, and to inspire more people to care and take action. Recognising that “*many people don’t have enough nature in their lives to be healthy*”, the Trust aims to increase access so everyone can benefit, by removing practical barriers like distance and emotional barriers like belonging. A key aspect of distance to Trust properties is the ‘last mile’ – that from a public transport connection to the property itself – with the potential of the PROW network to provide that connectivity having been highlighted.

¹⁹ [Green infrastructure assessment of Cheshire East](#)

²⁰ [Green infrastructure assessment of Cheshire East](#) derived from <http://leep.exeter.ac.uk/orval/>

²¹ Christies and Matthews (2003) *The economic and social value of walking in England and Sport and Recreation Alliance (2014) The Economic Contribution of Outdoor Recreation: The Evidence*

²² [Cheshire and Warrington Destination Management Plan](#)

²³ [Our strategy to 2035 | National Trust](#)

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This aspiration, to widen the range of people using the countryside access networks, is mirrored in the Ramblers' 2024 strategy *Opening the Way*²⁴. The walking charity wants a future where anyone can enjoy walking outdoors and aims to prioritise the needs of communities with the least access and which face the most barriers to the outdoors. Focusing on working with the most deprived communities, the Ramblers note the need to improve confidence and knowledge to walk outdoors. This need is a recurring issue raised by stakeholders

Health and wellbeing

The health and wellbeing benefits of physical activity are well recognised. NHS England²⁵ has stated that:

- *“physical inactivity is estimated to contribute to almost 1 in 10 premature deaths from coronary heart disease ... and 1 in 6 deaths in the UK from any cause*
- *physical inactivity is increasingly recognised as a global health priority that should be the concern of all healthcare systems*
- *the greatest health and economic gains can be made by supporting those who are physically inactive to participate in some physical activity*
- *physical activity helps to delay the onset and progression of diseases for as long as possible, it also helps people to recover from surgery more quickly and it is beneficial for mental health”.*

NHS England²⁶ highlight the economic value of activity for the health of the nation, with people who are inactive being less able to participate in society, both socially and economically. Cited is a report into the social and economic value of community sport and physical activity in England²⁷ which found that over £9.5 billion in value to the economy can be attributed to the role of physical activity in preventing a number of serious physical and mental health conditions. The report found that of this amount:

- *“£5.2 billion was in healthcare savings*
- *£1.7 billion was in social care savings*
- *more than £3.6 billion worth of savings were generated by the prevention of 900,000 cases of diabetes*

²⁴ [Opening the Way: The Ramblers' Strategic Ambition - Ramblers](#)

²⁵ [NHS England » Harnessing the benefits of physical activity](#)

²⁶ [NHS England » Harnessing the benefits of physical activity](#)

²⁷ Sport England and Sheffield Hallam University (2019) [Social and Economic Value of Community Sport and Physical Activity in England](#)

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- *a further £3.5 billion of value was generated in avoided dementia cases and the related care*
- *£450 million was saved by preventing 30 million additional GP visits”.*

The Cheshire East Public Health Annual Report 2022²⁸ states that Cheshire East has a low proportion of physically inactive adults (29.4%). However, it notes a higher prevalence of inactivity among children and young people as compared to the North West and England. Additionally, the percentage of adults walking or cycling for travel is lower than the regional and national levels.

In addition, *where* that activity is undertaken can also play a role in our health and wellbeing. It is recognised that *“exposure to green and blue space is associated with improved wellbeing, physical activity and health outcomes”* and that *“there is now a large body of literature that evidences the positive association between good health and wellbeing and time spent in nature”*²⁹. Further, improvements in air quality arising from increased active travel can only improve the health of our communities.

Relating these benefits to those derived from countryside access, in 2020, the value of health benefits associated with outdoor recreation within the UK was estimated to be between £6.2 billion and £8.4 billion³⁰. An estimated annual saving of £2.1 billion would be achieved through averted health costs if everyone in England had good access to nature”³¹.

*“I walked with a friend yesterday starting from Rainow.
We took a 7 mile circular route following part of the Gritstone Trail and
field paths. We were very impressed by the excellent signposting and
especially the many gates replacing stiles.
They make walking so much easier for we oldies. Thank you.”*

Activity can also play a part in a person’s wellbeing. Sport England’s Active Lives Survey³² has identified that those undertaking activity levels of at least 150 minutes a week are more likely to report higher levels of happiness, worthwhileness and life satisfaction, whilst reporting lower levels of anxiety. Natural England³³ note the Department for Education’s recognition of the importance of learning in the natural

²⁸ [Cheshire East Public Health annual 2022 report](#)

²⁹ [Mughal R., Seers H., Polley M., Sabey A. & Chatterjee H.J. \(2022\) How the natural environment can support health and wellbeing through social prescribing. NASP.](#)

³⁰ [Office for National Statistics \(2022\) Health benefits from recreation, natural capital, UK: 2022](#)

³¹ [Defra blog 3/01/2025](#)

³² [Active Lives | Sport England](#)

³³ [Natural England \(2024\) Joining up nature recovery and health priorities](#)

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environment for physical and mental health³⁴, and the Government's Levelling Up aspirations including the importance of access to natural spaces"³⁵.

In order to design-in activity in daily lives, Sport England's Active Design Guide³⁶ urges good planning to create active environments through place-making and routes to provide connectivity. The Guide features 10 over-arching principals built on the foundation principal of 'Activity for All'. In recognition that walking, cycling, running and fitness make up 80% of all minutes of activity taken per week, the Guide highlights the opportunity that the creation of active environments can play in delivering health and wellbeing outcomes. It also notes the wider benefits brought about by such planning, in environmentally friendly and sustainable places, social inclusion and economic productivity.

³⁴ Department for Education (2022) [*Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy*](#)

³⁵ [Joining up nature recovery and health priorities – Natural England](#)

³⁶ [Active Design | Sport England](#)

Conclusion

Data on use of the PROW and countryside access network is not extensive nor comprehensive. However, that which is available suggests that some routes and sites are heavily used and highly valued. The importance of the network was clearly demonstrated through the Covid pandemic lockdowns for health and wellbeing, for active travel and for both our communities and our visitors.

The health and wellbeing benefits of outdoor physical activity, much of which will be enabled by the PROW and wider countryside access networks, is clear. Evidence now “*points towards the benefits of nature-based social prescriptions on long term health and wellbeing*”³⁷ with shorter distances to nature from people’s homes being of benefit. For this reason, green social prescribing is embedded within the NHS long term plan³⁸, with accessible greenspace being highlighted as a determinant of health by the Department for Health and Social Care³⁹.

³⁷ [Mughal R., Seers H., Polley M., Sabey A. & Chatterjee H.J. \(2022\) *How the natural environment can support health and wellbeing through social prescribing*. NASP.](#)

³⁸ [NHS England » Green social prescribing](#)

³⁹ Department for Health and Social Care (2023) [Major Conditions Strategy](#)