



# The Countryside Code:

## Stakeholder Survey

A summary of findings

April 2021

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ISBN 978-1-78354-735-7

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## Summary

- 1. Introduction.** England's green and natural spaces have provided solace for the population during the pandemic. Natural England's People and Nature Survey shows that 70% of adults are spending time outside at least once a week<sup>1</sup>. This increase in demand, while bringing many much-needed benefits to society in terms of health and wellbeing, has placed pressure on our wild spaces and those species and people whose lives and livelihoods depend on them. This document summarises the key findings from a quantitative survey of stakeholders conducted during winter 2020/21 to inform work to refresh the Countryside Code. A total of 3,801 responses were received. In interpreting these results, it is important to note that seasonal factors may have influenced the salience of some issues.
- 2. Purpose of the Code.** Most participants (92%) agreed that the Code is important to set expectations of responsible recreation. However, few reported that they felt it had led to change on the ground, with one in eleven agreeing that the Code has led to behavioural change. Over three quarters agreed that it is important that the Code applies to all types of green and natural space, including urban parks as well as countryside. The results suggest that there is an acceptable balance in terms of tone, with around a third feeling it should be more positively framed ('do'), a third more negatively framed ('don't') and a third feeling that the balance is about right. Around half of respondents considered that the Code had a single purpose: to protect the countryside, natural places and rural communities; whilst the other half felt that the purpose of the Code was to do this as well as to welcome everyone into the countryside.
- 3. Awareness.** Most stakeholders want more to be done to raise awareness of the Code. Personal contacts and networks, along with social media, were the most frequently cited mechanisms by which stakeholders became aware of the short version of the Code. Seven per cent agreed that 'there is generally a high level of awareness amongst the general public'. Three quarters considered it to be very or extremely important that Natural England delivers public-facing communications or a public campaign to promote the Code, and perhaps, in light of this, a minority of participants (9%) considered that Natural England does a good job promoting the Code.
- 4. Using and promoting the Code** In total, 16% of participants said that they promote the short version of the Code (aimed at the public), compared to 12% that promote the long version (aimed at land managers as well as the public). Promotion of particular aspects of the Code was more common than promotion of the Code in full. The messages promoted most often were: 'leave no trace of your visit, take all your litter home'; 'keep dogs under effective control'; and, 'leave gates and property as you find them'. The main audiences targeted were: walkers and ramblers; local residents; dog walkers; people who may be new visitors to the countryside; and cyclists.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/people-and-nature-survey-for-england>

5. **Behaviours** Stakeholders were asked to rate the importance of the behaviours that had previously been included in the Code, as well as rating a longer list including additional behaviours. The most important behaviours identified were: 'leave no trace of your visit, take all your litter home'; 'keep dogs under effective control'; 'leave gates and property as you find them'; 'don't have BBQs or fires'; and, 'dog poo – bag it and bin it'. Two thirds of participants were supportive of including new items in the Code aimed at increasing wellbeing and a closer connection to nature.
6. **Inclusion** Almost all stakeholders agreed that it is important that the Code reaches people who might be newer to spending time in the countryside. There was support for the Code as a way to encourage more inclusive access for under-represented groups and those with diverse physical and sensory needs.
7. **Conclusions** This report concludes with a summary of future research and how Natural England is responding to issues raised by stakeholders via this survey.

## Introduction

8. England's green and natural spaces have provided solace for the population during the pandemic, with 70% of adults reporting that they are spending time outside at least once a week (an increasing trend that has continued well into the winter months)<sup>2</sup>. This increase in demand, while bringing many much-needed benefits to society in terms of health and wellbeing, has placed pressure on our wild spaces and those species and people whose lives and livelihoods depend on them.
9. Natural England has a statutory duty to produce and promote the Countryside Code (also referred to here as 'the Code'), to guide people visiting the countryside, as well as a duty to advise landowners and managers in relation to access. To help inform an update to the Code, Natural England sought views from stakeholders including organisations representing farmers and landowners, land managers, access organisations, sports and activity organisations, conservation organisations and other NGOs.
10. This document summarises the key findings from a quantitative survey of stakeholders focused on the Countryside Code undertaken during winter 2020/21. In interpreting these results, it is important to note that the timing of this survey may have influenced the salience of particular issues – for example, we might expect gates to be rated as a higher priority during lambing season, and BBQs and fire lighting when wildfire risk is heightened.
11. The survey was undertaken to help ensure that the Code responds to the current needs of countryside users and managers, checking that it includes topics that reflect

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<sup>2</sup> Interim monthly indicator for January 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-monthly-interim-indicators-for-january-2021-experimental-statistics>

current land management practices and visitor habits, in light of changes associated with the pandemic.

12. Natural England was also keen to understand stakeholder views related to elements of the Code beyond those set out in legislation. For example, ensuring that the messaging in the Code is inclusive and welcoming. This is to ensure that it will feel relevant to as wide an audience as possible: particularly for children, young people and those parts of our communities we know (e.g. People and Nature Survey for England<sup>3</sup>) have inequitable access to green and natural spaces, such as those from low income areas, urban areas, ethnic minority backgrounds, younger people and people with long term health conditions.
13. The survey, which was delivered online only, opened on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2020 and closed on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2021. The survey was promoted directly to an initial list of approximately 80 known stakeholders, who were invited to share it with their networks in order to extend its reach. A total of 3,801 completed or partially completed surveys were received.
14. The survey contained 38 questions, none of which were mandatory, and so all percentage values reported here represent the proportion of responses to that particular question, unless stated otherwise.
15. The majority of survey participants (91%) responded in an individual capacity, with the remainder (9%) responding on behalf of an organisation or group. Participants could select multiple options when asked about their interest(s) in the Code. The five most commonly reported interests were:
  - as a member of the public who visits rural or coastal areas (48%);
  - as a member of the public who visits urban greenspaces (20%);
  - as a landowner or land manager (16%);
  - as someone who has promoted or wishes to promote the Code (14%); and
  - as a farmer or farming representative (11%).
16. This summary shares some of the key findings from the survey relating to awareness of the Code, use and promotion of the Code, the purpose and impact of the Code, the topics covered in the Code, the framing of messages in the Code and the extent to

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/people-and-nature-survey-for-england>

which inclusion is addressed. It concludes by listing some of the actions that Natural England has taken, or plans to take, to respond to these findings.

# COUNTRYSIDE CODE: STAKEHOLDER SURVEY

## About the survey



**48  
DAYS**

The survey was open from 16th December 2020 to 1st February 2021



**3,801**

### PEOPLE TOOK PART

The survey was promoted directly to an initial list of approximately 80 known stakeholders, who were invited to share it with their networks in order to extend its reach.

**38**



This survey was online only and contained 38 questions, none of which were mandatory

**91%**

91% of participants responded in an individual capacity; only 9% responded on behalf of an organisation or group.



The five most commonly reported types of interest in the Code were: as a member of the public who visits rural / coastal areas (48%); as a member of the public who visits urban greenspaces (20%); as a landowner / land manager (16%); as someone who has promoted / wishes to promote the Code (14%); and as a farmer / farming representative (11%)

**48%**



## Purpose and impact of the Code

17. The majority of participants (92%) agreed or strongly agreed that the Code is important to set expectations of responsible recreation.
18. Just over half of respondents (52%) considered that the Code had twin purposes of i) welcoming everyone into the countryside and ii) protecting the countryside, natural places and rural communities. However, just under half (45%) considered that the Code had a single purpose: to protect the countryside, natural places and rural communities. Two per cent thought that the Code's main purpose is to welcome everyone into the countryside and natural places<sup>4</sup>.
19. The survey results suggest a lack of evidence, or awareness of evidence, that the Code has led to change on the ground: less than a tenth of participants (9%) agreed or strongly agreed that there is evidence that the Code has led to behavioural change.
20. Perceptions of public compliance with the behaviours set out in the Code were found to vary: over a third (37%) agreed or strongly agreed that 'it is only a small minority of people who do not comply with the Code', whilst 44% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.
21. Over three quarters of survey participants (77%) agreed or strongly agreed that it is important that the Code applies to all types of green and natural space, including urban parks as well as countryside.
22. The results suggest that there is an acceptable balance in the Code between positively and negatively framed messaging. Just over a third of participants (38%) considered the balance to be about right; almost a third (32%) thought the Code should be framed more in terms of positive behaviours (i.e. positively framed messaging); and the remainder (31%) thought the Code should be framed more around tackling problematic behaviours (i.e. negatively framed messaging).

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<sup>4</sup> Note that these do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

# THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE COUNTRYSIDE CODE

Survey participants were asked to choose which statement they agreed with the most. 1,921 people responded.



**45%**

of participants said the main purpose of the Code is to protect the countryside, natural places and rural communities

**2%**

of participants said the main purpose of the Code is to welcome everyone into the countryside and natural places



**52%**

of participants said that they consider both purposes - that is, protecting the countryside, natural places and rural communities *and* welcoming everyone into the countryside and natural places - to be equally important



## Awareness of the Code

23. Natural England has a statutory duty to produce and promote the Countryside Code, to guide people visiting the countryside. Just over half of participants (55%) were aware of this duty.
24. Natural England also has a statutory duty to advise landowners and managers in relation to providing access on their land for visitors the countryside. Just over half (58%) were aware of this duty.
25. There is a strong perception amongst respondents that public awareness of the Code could be improved – only 7% agreed or strongly agreed that ‘there is generally a high level of awareness amongst the general public about the Code’.
26. Whilst all aspects of Natural England’s statutory duty were considered important by the majority of participants, over three quarters (76%) considered it to be very or extremely important that Natural England delivers public-facing communications or a public campaign to promote the Code. (The last major public promotion campaign was in 2004 using characters created by Aardman animations<sup>5</sup>.) Few participants considered that Natural England does a good job promoting the Code, with only 9% agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement.
27. The Countryside Code’s strapline, ‘Respect, Protect, Enjoy’, received some support from survey participants, but is not widely known or used in promotions. A quarter of participants (25% of all responses) agreed that the strapline is a great summary of the Code, but 35% were not really aware of the strapline prior to the survey. Only 6% agreed that the strapline has good brand recognition and just 2% use it in communications and promotions at least some of the time.
28. Two versions of the Code have been published: a short version, aimed at visitors to the countryside; and a longer version, which also includes information for landowners and managers. The short version was updated during summer 2020 in response to the increase in visits to the countryside associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and was accompanied by a summer-long campaign to promote the safe enjoyment of the countryside, in partnership with stakeholders.
29. Familiarity with each version of the Code – judged in terms of having read it recently – was fairly low. Less than a third of participants (30%) were aware of the short version and had read it. One in ten participants (10%) were both aware of the long version and had read it in the last year. The summer 2020 campaign promoting the short version could account at least in part for this difference.

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<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://www.aardman.com/work/country-side-code/>

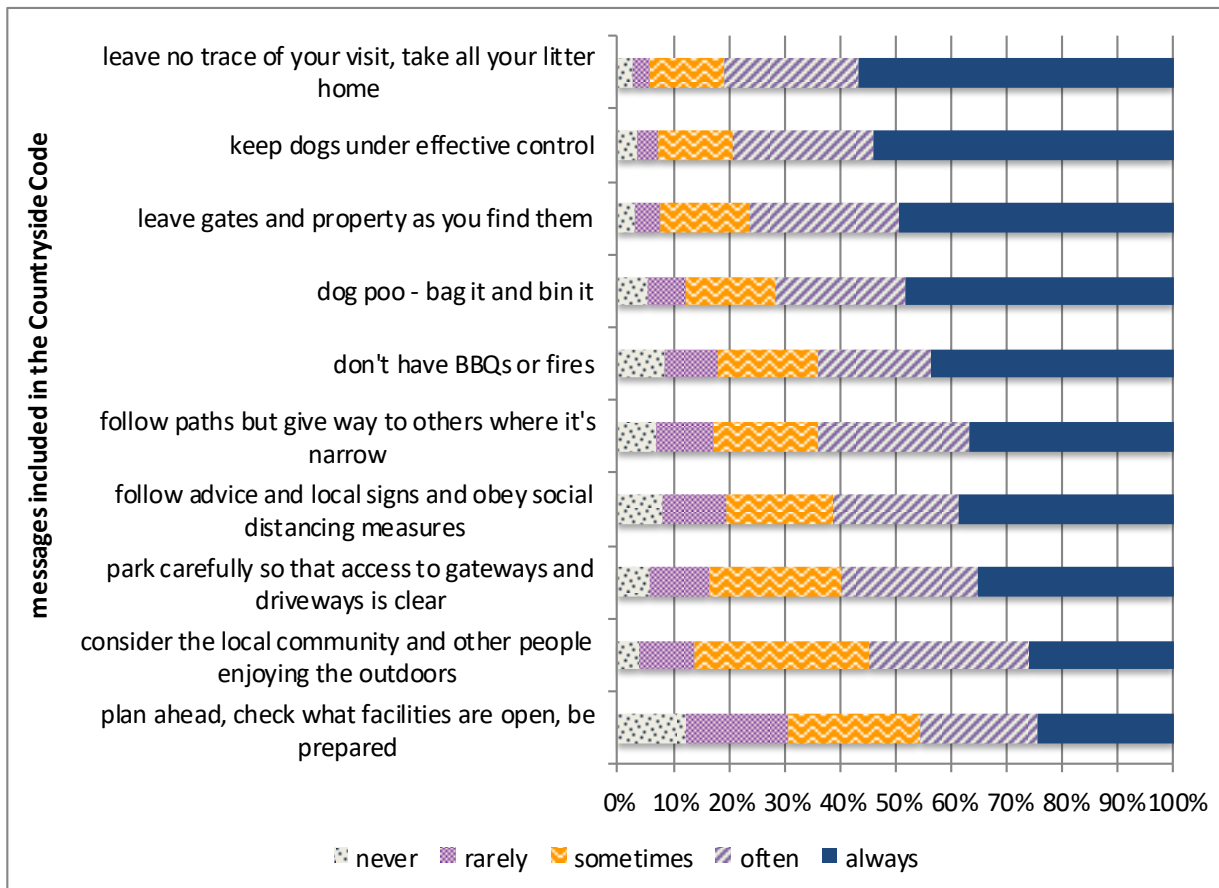


the short version, compared to 12% that promote the long version. Of those that reported promoting both versions of the Code, just over half (55%) used or promoted the short version the most, whilst 41% said they promote both versions equally.

32. Two thirds of those who promote the long version of the Code (66%) promote particular aspects of it, at least some of the time, whilst only a quarter (25%) promote it in full.

33. Figure 2 shows the frequency that each of the main messages contained in the Countryside Code were promoted by stakeholders. The three messages promoted most often (i.e. those which received the most 'often' or 'always' ratings) were: leave no trace of your visit, take all your litter home (81%); keep dogs under effective control (79%); and leave gates and property as you find them (76%). The three messages that the greatest proportion of respondents said they 'never' or 'rarely' promoted were: plan ahead, check what facilities are open, be prepared (31%); follow advice and local signs and obey social distancing measures (19%); and don't have BBQs or fires (18%).

**Figure 2:** The frequency with which each of the main messages contained in the Countryside Code are promoted, shown as a percentage of responses for each message listed. The most frequently promoted message was 'leave no trace of your visit, take all your litter home'. This question was only shown to survey participants who had said that they promote either the short or the long version of the Code, or both versions.

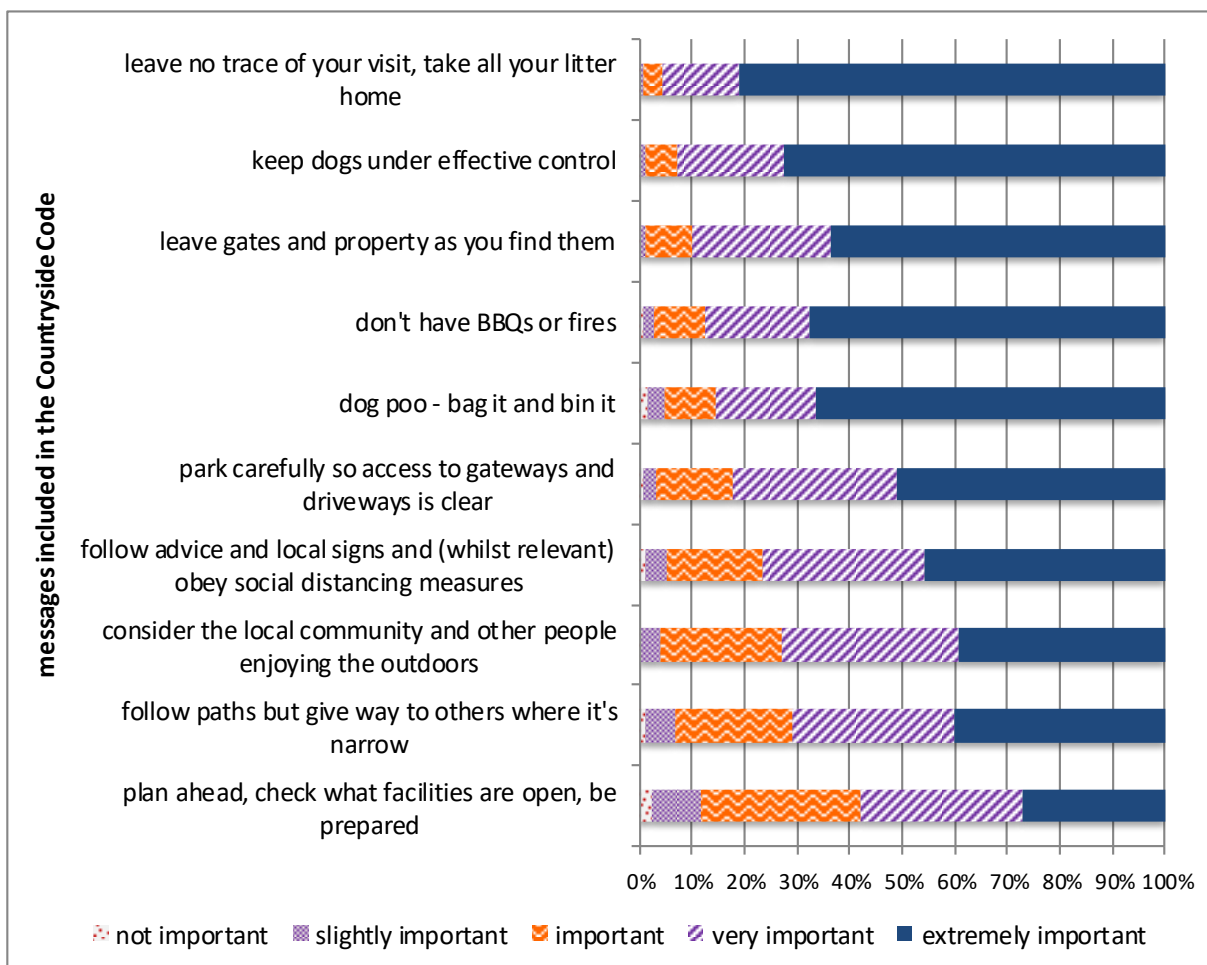


34. For those that said they have promoted either (or both) version(s) of the Code, the Code was most commonly used in relation to visits to the countryside: 14% of participants had used the Code to inform their own visits to the countryside, and 11% had used it to inform the advice and guidance they provide to countryside visitors. The least commonly cited uses of the Code related to landowners and land managers: only 3% of participants had used it to inform their own land management practices and only 2% had used it to inform the advice and guidance they provide to landowners and land managers. (This finding should be considered in relation to the comparatively small proportion of survey participants stating that their interest in the Code was in relation to their role as a farmer / farming representative or landowner / land manager.)
35. The top five audiences for promoting the Code to were: walkers and ramblers; local residents; dog walkers; people who may be new visitors to the countryside; and cyclists. The five audiences that the Code was least promoted to were: anglers; people with diverse physical and sensory needs; canoeists, paddleboarders and recreational boaters; the professional networks of those responding; and people using urban parks and greenspaces.
36. There was some difference in which versions of the Code were promoted to particular audiences, although the short version was promoted more often than the long version for all audience types. The short version was promoted much more than the long version to walkers and ramblers, people who may be new visitors to the countryside, local residents, dog walkers and tourists and holidaymakers.
37. Stakeholders were asked what support from Natural England they would find most helpful, or would be most needed, in their use and promotion of the Code. The most frequently occurring words included in these responses are shown in the form of a word cloud in Figure 3.



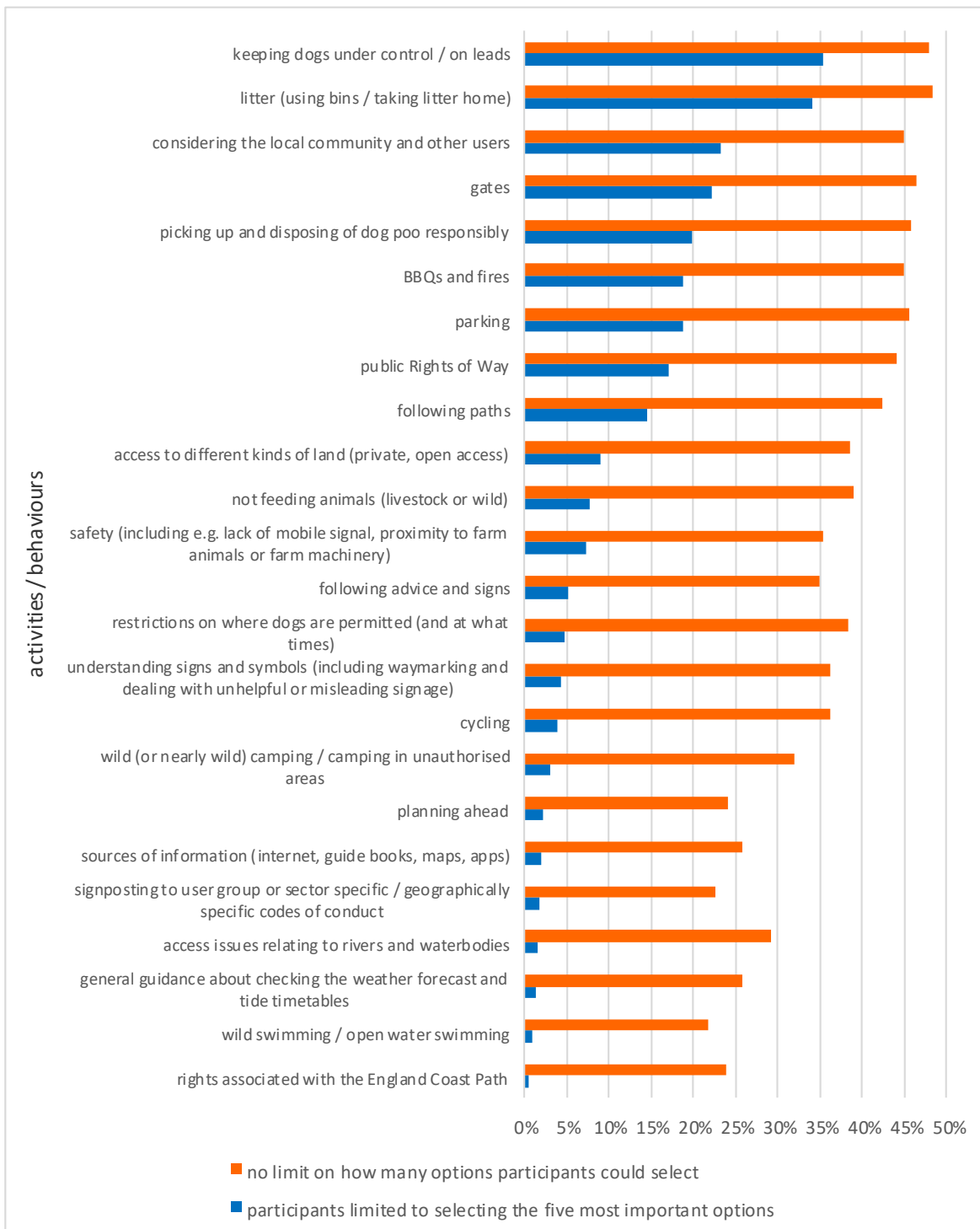
- don't have BBQs or fires (87%); and,
- dog poo – bag it and bin it (86%).

**Figure 4:** The importance ascribed to each of the behaviours contained in the Countryside Code by survey participants. For each behaviour, importance is rated on a five-point scale, from not important to extremely important.



39. Participants were asked to choose which behaviours should be included in the version of the Code aimed at visitors to the countryside. The list of options included items from the Code alongside other options that had been suggested in previous rounds of consultation. They were asked this in two separate questions. For the first question, participants could choose as many options as they liked. However, in the second question, participants were asked to choose only five options. The results for both questions are shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5:** Chart showing which activities / behaviours were considered most important to include in the updated full version of the Code. Participants were first asked to choose any options that they thought should be included in the updated Code, and were not limited in the number of options they could choose (shown in orange). They were then asked to select just the five options that they considered to be most important to include (shown in blue). Both ratings show that the most important behaviours to stakeholders were related to keeping dogs under control and litter.



40. When there was no limit on the number of options that participants could choose, the results show broad support for all items listed. When asked to choose only five behaviours or activities to include, the most commonly selected options were: keeping dogs under control / on leads (35% of 3,791 responses); litter (using bins / taking litter home) (34%); considering the local community and other users (23%); gates (22%); and picking up and disposing of dog poo responsibly (20%).

41. The responses to this question were compared for three main groups of respondents: farmers, farming representatives, landowners and land managers; members of the public visiting rural, coastal or urban greenspaces; and professionals working in the environment sector, local or national government or NDPBs including Natural England. As shown in Table 1, keeping dogs under control / on leads, litter (using bins / taking litter home) and picking up and disposing of dog poo responsibly were in the top five most important activities or behaviours for each of these three respondent groups.

**Table 1:** The five most important activities or behaviours to include in the version of the Code aimed at visitors to the countryside, for three groups of respondent: farmers / farming representatives and landowners / land managers; members of the public who visit rural, coastal or urban greenspaces; and professionals working in the environment sector, local or national government or non-departmental public bodies including Natural England.

<b>Farmers / farming representatives and land owners / land managers</b>	<b>Members of the public – visitors to rural, coastal and urban greenspaces</b>	<b>Professionals working in the environment sector, local / national government or NDPBs including Natural England</b>
Keeping dogs under control / on leads	Litter (using bins / taking litter home)	Keeping dogs under control / on leads
Gates	Keeping dogs under control / on leads	Litter (using bins / taking litter home)
Litter (using bins / taking litter home)	Considering the local community and other users	Considering the local community and other users
Following paths	BBQs and fires	BBQs and fires
Picking up and disposing of dog poo responsibly	Picking up and disposing of dog poo responsibly	Picking up and disposing of dog poo responsibly

42. Two thirds of participants (65%) were supportive of including new items in the Code aimed at increasing wellbeing and a closer connection to nature. There was a high level of support for 'encouraging visitors to pause (e.g. to stop-look-listen to wildlife around you)' and for 'promoting the outdoors as a place for relaxation and



peacefulness', with lower levels of support for 'providing more advice to plan ahead, know your way'.

43. For the version of the Code aimed at landowners and land managers, there was support for including more on legal rights for the public (43% of all responses); gaps, gates and stiles (39%); ensuring accessibility, including signage (37%); safety (35%); and preventing and managing trespass (30%).

## Inclusion

44. The large majority of participants (89%) reported that it is important, very important or extremely important that the Code reaches people who might be newer to spending time in the countryside – such as people who historically have been under-represented in the countryside like those from low income areas, urban areas, ethnic minority backgrounds, younger people and people with long-term health conditions.
45. Two thirds of participants (65%) agreed or strongly agreed that the Code is an important way to encourage more inclusive access to the countryside and coast, whilst only 11% disagreed or strongly disagreed.
46. Over two thirds of participants (68%) think that the Code should have more emphasis on encouraging access for those with diverse physical and sensory needs, whilst 32% think that it should not.

## Conclusions

47. The results showed strong stakeholder support for the Code and its application in a broader range of natural settings, including urban greenspaces as well as rural and coastal areas.
48. There is consensus around the priority behaviours and there was also support for new emphasis on increasing wellbeing, inclusion and a closer connection to nature.
49. Analysis of survey respondents suggests that more work is needed to reach out to a broader and more diverse range of stakeholders, especially those that have been historically under-represented in the countryside, to understand more about their particular needs and to take this forward. Natural England is continuing to gather insights from those groups to support our duties to promote the Code and is also including new questions on Code awareness and behaviours in our People and Nature Survey for England.

50. The stakeholder feedback is conclusive in that the Code is critical to set expectations about how to behave in the countryside. However, it is also clear that these expectations alone will not change behaviour and that there is widespread support for more to be done to raise awareness and change behaviour. As a result, Natural England has begun new research to develop and test ways to do this, focused on key behaviours identified by stakeholders, which will be published shortly.

## Question and Answer: responding to issues raised in the survey

51. This section sets out Natural England's response to issues raised by stakeholders via this survey.

### **52. How do we think the Code can help to influence behaviour change?**

53. Natural England has worked with the Behavioural Insights Team<sup>6</sup> in order to learn more about how to get messages across that lead to behaviour change and this has helped to inform the refresh to date and the new promotional campaign over spring - summer 2021. This work will continue over the next few months to inform and help evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign, as we plan to continue to develop the campaign further.

### **54. How are we planning to promote the use of the Code in urban and coastal areas?**

55. We are working closely with partners in both urban, rural and coastal areas to promote the code in these areas. The campaign features imagery from the full variety of outdoor spaces. Over the spring-summer 2021, Natural England will be evaluating whether further change is needed including developing the campaign, and if a change of name would be helpful.

### **56. How have we addressed low awareness of the Code in the refresh?**

57. Natural England has continued to promote the Code sending out 16,000 leaflets/bookmarks on average per year. The Code messages were also incorporated into the Respect the Outdoors campaign promoted via social media last summer.

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<sup>6</sup> The [Behavioural Insights Team](#) are partly owned by the Cabinet Office and work with departments across government and beyond to generate and apply behavioural insights to inform policy, improve public services and deliver results for citizens and society.

Natural England recognises that the Code has not had a major promotional campaign for some time. We are addressing this with a new campaign launched in spring 2021 that will continue over the next 12 months. The focus of the campaign is to raise awareness of the Code, making particular use of Social Media where the most relevant information can quickly and easily be shared where people are most likely to be looking for it, or related topics. The campaign will be evaluated to look at how the most successful elements can be sustained.

## **58. What funding is planned for the Code?**

59. Natural England has funding to invest £50,000 over the next financial year (2021/22) in promoting the code. Further funding is being sought in order to help develop the campaign.

## **60. How are we planning to reach new audiences?**

61. The Code has been refreshed with the input from this survey as well as more detailed input from over 25 partner organisations. These partners are supporting Code promotion and the campaign by helping to share the messages with their networks and onwards. In addition, Natural England will be working with influencers and trusted representatives in communities to help reach new audiences. We will also be doing further work over the spring and summer 2021 to learn more about what new visitors' needs are so that they feel confident to access nature and that the facilities and welcome will help them have a good experience.

62. The Code itself is just the starting point, and as survey respondents recognised, sets an important set of expectations and behaviours. Promotion and the campaign are likely to make the difference in terms of awareness and behaviour change. This will be evaluated over the summer to inform longer term plans recognising that behaviour change takes time. By working across sectors and talking about spending time outdoors in ways that are relevant and appeal to different groups, the campaign is designed to reach more people. Survey responses told us that it was helpful to highlight elements of the Code when they are most relevant so that will be a big feature of the campaign rather than simply reproducing the Code to be digested all at once.

## **63. What materials are we producing?**

64. We are producing material that can be downloaded and printed should people wish to do so. We are producing a limited number of small flyers. Digital assets have two big advantages in that they can be easily updated as we learn more and they don't result in litter in the landscape.

## **65. How are we planning to reach younger people?**

66. We know that most people want to do the right thing and the refreshed Code is about helping everyone know what that is. The survey and partner engagement told us that stakeholders think the Code has an important role to play in building confidence and changing behaviours. As such, one of the aims of the campaign is to help everyone form a life-long healthy relationship with the natural environment. As part of the campaign we will work with the education sector to look at easy ways to share the messages from the Code with children. The campaign will also focus on reaching younger audiences.