

County Durham Local Access Forum

At a meeting of the **County Durham Local Access Forum** held at Ceddesfeld Hall Sedgefield on **Monday 24 April 2006** at **6.00 p.m.**

William Salvin in the Chair

Members of the Forum

Roger Cornwell, Bob Kirton-Darling, Gael Dixon, Alan Dougherty, Bryan Harwood, Brian Hodgson, Geoff Hughes, David Maughan, Steve Scoffin, Lindsay Waddell and Fred Wright

Officers

Barry Charlton, Mike Ogden and Jackie Salmon (Durham County Council)
Chris Pope (Countryside Agency)

Apologies were received from Barbara Crozier and Councillor Bob Pendelbury

1. Welcome and Introduction

The Chairman opened the meeting welcomed everyone in attendance.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2006 were agreed as a correct record.

3. Matters Arising

Annual Report – Jackie Salmon informed the Forum that a draft annual report for 2005/06 would be available for the next meeting.

Open Access Restrictions – Mike Ogden advised that the County Council had received the formal notification of the long-term restrictions.

Dedication of County Council Land - Barry Charlton advised that an e-mail had been recently received from the Head of Corporate Estates explaining that he would not recommend the dedication of County Council land. Members of the Forum expressed their disappointment with the limited nature of the reply and were of the view that the issue had not been properly considered. It was felt that this was an issue that needed a political decision. Mike Ogden explained that a bid had been made to host one of the Countryside Agency projects. The Forum asked the Secretary to write to Head of Corporate Estates expressing their disappointment and asking that this issue be re-considered.

Youth Hostels – Bryan Harwood informed the Forum that the YHA had decided to close a number of hostels in the North East region.

Regional LAF Co-ordinators – Mike Ogden informed the Forum that a meeting of regional co-ordinators had taken place in January. There was a general feeling that the role and objectives of the co-ordinators were unrealistic as they already held full time posts within their own authorities. The Countryside Agency would be working through the regional offices with their own budget to provide additional support for Forums. Mike circulated a note produced by Defra, outlining the role of Defra and the Countryside Agency. An attempt had been made by Northumberland to arrange an informal meeting for Chairs of local Forum's but this had to be cancelled.

4. Open Access - Update

The Forum received an update from Mike Ogden on Open Access. A bid for further grant aid had been made for 2006/07, though the amount is likely to be limited. The final details of the long-term restrictions in the North Pennines have been received and this will enable signage to be finalised. It is hoped to incorporate information on dog restrictions within the signs.

The Countryside Agency is encouraging the County Council to monitor the use and activity within the open access areas. It is hoped that funding will be made available to formalise this work using volunteers.

Concerns were again raised that the proliferation of signage and poor quality maps were confusing users, with the result that some landowners were now erecting their own signs. Chris Pope explained that a signage review was taking place and would report any updates. It was highlighted that some users were ignoring restrictions and it was suggested that it would be helpful to have a procedure to report problems. Mike Ogden agreed to consider this suggestion. Mike advised that he was discussing with AONB staff about using signs that can be re-dated as and when required rather than adding a new sign for each closure.

Reference was made to the lower level of temporary restrictions being used in the North York Moors National Park. It appeared that the NPA (who are the relevant authority for the area) are encouraging landowners/tenants to use restrictions sparingly. Mike Ogden advised that local highway authorities have no role in the implementation of temporary restrictions (ie the 28 day allowance) and this is an issue for the Countryside Agency and the landowner/tenant to determine. It was felt that it was difficult to draw any conclusions at the present time as Open Access had been in operation for less than 12 months.

5. Rights of Way Improvement Plan/LTP2

Jackie Salmon provided an update on the Rights of Way Improvement Plan. A user assessment survey questionnaire was being circulated. This will run September. Seventy forms had been returned in the first 3 weeks. The questionnaires are to be distributed to tourist information centres, libraries etc

from next month. It is hoped to reach and obtain the views of those who currently don't use the network.

An equestrian pilot study in the Easington area is to take place and will build on previous work. Interested parties will be invited to participate in the mapping exercises and the outcome will be fed into the ROWIP.

Parish Councils will be contacted for their views during the RoWIP process. It was agreed that landowner views should be sought as part of the network assessment. In response to questions about litter and fly tipping, it was explained that the issue of anti social behaviour would be addressed in the RoWIP.

Concern was expressed that work on the RoWIP was not being focussed on the pilot areas identified at the Forum's workshops. Geoff Hughes stated that the pilot projects were intended to examine local network problems and issues and how they could be improved. Jackie explained that the Government's guidance to highway authorities on RoWIP's requires that highway authorities make an assessment of the extent to which the rights of way network meets the present and future needs of the public and that as a result the authority needs to take a strategic view. It was hoped that strategic routes across the County for utility journeys could be mapped. The Chairman suggested that it would be helpful if officers could revisit the pilot project identified at the Forum's workshops and sought reassurance that they would be considered or if not, what were the obstacles to the pilot projects being implemented.

In response to questions about market research it was further explained that as part of the process, attendance at road shows and public events would take place as a way of canvassing public opinion.

6 Work Programme

The Secretary explained the background to this item and the Forum's views were sought on the structure of the agenda for future meetings. It was recognised that there was a need to include regular items of business on each agenda such as the ROWIP and Access to the Coast. The Forum discussed a number of alternative suggestions for the agenda and work programme including:

- Pre or Post meeting workshops
- A presentation each meeting by the different user groups
- A pre-determined discussion on topical subjects

The Chairman reminded the Forum that its role is advisory and that it needed to focus on relevant issues bearing in mind the time available for the discussion of agenda items.

It was agreed, bearing in mind time constraints, that for each quarterly meeting user groups will have the opportunity to give a presentation on relevant issues. The Secretary was requested to consult Forum members for agenda items. Mike Ogden agreed to include a copy of the minutes of the Access and Liaison Group on the agenda.

7. Coastal Access

Mike Ogden informed the Forum that the County Durham and Hartlepool Coast (from Seaham to River Tees) had been selected as one of four pilot projects examining how access to the coastline can be improved. A workshop has been held at Easington examining the challenges that need to be overcome to improve coastal access. Consultants appointed by the Countryside Agency have to complete their work by May and it is expected that the outcome will be reported during October. The outcome of the study will be fed into the ROWIP. There was concern that improvements to access in the coastal areas would be in isolation to the rest of the network.

8. Modification Orders

Jackie Salmon asked Forum members to provide feedback on changes to priorities for modification orders. A report updating the present position will be submitted to the Highways Committee in June and this will be an opportunity to reconsider the priorities for dealing with the backlog of modification orders. The Secretary agreed to forward Audrey Christies e-mail address to enable Forum members to respond.

9. Tenure/Chair and Vice Chair of Forum

The Secretary reminded the Forum that it had been agreed that all Forum members had been re-appointed for a period of two years subject to attending at least two meetings a year. The Forum was advised that the election of the Chair and Vice Chair would be considered at the next meeting and nominations would be sought prior to the meeting.

10. Access to the Countryside Scrutiny Project - Update

The Secretary provided an update on the County Council Scrutiny project 'Access to the Countryside'. Since the Forum gave evidence on 30 January 2006, the Working Group has met several times to take evidence. The views of users and landowners are currently being sought. It is expected that the draft report and recommendations will be considered by the Environment Scrutiny Sub Committee at its meeting on 19 June 2006.

11. Regional Local Access Forum Event – Newcastle 5 May 2006

Mike Ogden informed the Forum that a regional planning day had been organised by the Countryside Agency on 5 May 2006. The event was being held to plan an event for all members of North East Local Access Forums which is expected to take place in September 2006.

12. Agenda Items for the next Meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting would take place at 6.00 p.m. on Thursday 6 July 2006 at the Dales Centre, Stanhope.

It was intended to invite Amanda Earnshaw of the Countryside Agency to give an update on 'Discovering Lost Ways'.