

## County Durham Local Access Forum

At a meeting of the **County Durham Local Access Forum** held at County Hall, Durham on **Tuesday 7 June 2005** at **6.00 p.m.**

**William Salvin** in the Chair

### **Members of the Forum**

Roger Cornwell, Barbara Crozier, Alan Dougherty, Brian Hodgson, Geoff Hughes, Bob Kirton-Darling, David Maughan, Steve Scoffin, Lindsay Waddell and Fred Wright.

### **Officers**

Jackie Brown, Barry Charlton and Audrey Christie

Apologies for absence were received from Gael Dixon Bryan Harwood and Brian Oram.

### **1. Election of Chairman**

That William Salvin be elected Chairman of the County Durham Local Access Forum.

**W Salvin** in the Chair

### **2. Election of Vice Chairman**

That Steve Scoffin be elected Vice-Chairman of the County Durham Local Access Forum.

### **3. Countryside Agency**

Martin Shaw of the Countryside Agency gave the Forum a progress report on the regional element of the Agency's work including the following areas:

**Natural England** The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill had received its second reading. The bill includes the establishment of Natural England, a new integrated agency, comprising all of English Nature, the landscape, access and recreation elements of the Countryside Agency, and the environmental land management functions of the Rural Development Service.

Natural England is expected to be operational by January 2007 and this is anticipated to help remove artificial barriers and improve collaboration with key partners.

**Open Access** Open access commenced on 28 May 2005 in Areas 4 and. The adoption of the Access Management Grant Scheme has provided funding for infrastructure works to manage open access and has benefited both Durham County Council and landowners.

The Agency has also been involved in work on the establishment of National Trails including Hadrians Wall, the Cleveland Way and the Pennine Way. In relation to Hadrians Wall, the Agency is working with partners to establish a company to manage the entire corridor of the walk.

**Rights of Way Improvement Plan** - Martin explained that the Agency is not able to fund the statutory functions of local authorities, though they were willing to help facilitate the process. They have written to all health authorities and funding is available to develop walking for health improvement schemes.

**Country Parks** – Country parks are seen as the gateway to the countryside and funding is available nationally for improvements for ten pilot projects.

**Local Access Forums** – Following on from the workshop held in January the Agency have commissioned consultants to report on ways of assisting Forums. In addition they are to facilitate a regional forum to allow the exchange of information. It is expected that the first meeting will take place in the autumn. Martin advised that Open Access is moving up the national agenda and is likely to receive greater priority from Natural England.

In the following discussion, Martin explained that funding for pilot projects is likely to be ring fenced. Applications are to be considered in the near future and it is anticipated that that funding will be awarded by the autumn.

In relation to the Access Management Grant Scheme Audrey Christie advised that the County Council had received £75,000 to fund works for open access. Grants had also been made to the larger estates.

Members of the Forum expressed concern that the establishment of Natural England is likely to lead to delays. Martin assured the Forum that this was not the case and reiterated that the Agency will establish the regional forum and wished to develop their strategic regional role.

The Forum thanked Martin for his attendance.

#### **4. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 March 2005 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **5. Matters Arising**

Referring to item 8 Tenure, Audrey Christie explained that the preferred outcome was to offer all members a 2 year tenure of membership subject to members attending at least two meetings per year. The Forum supported the proposal.

Further to the letter of 5 April 2005 from Defra, Jackie Brown explained that Defra were encouraging the Regional Sports Boards to meet with representatives of Local Access Forums. Martin Shaw suggested that it might be helpful if the discussion with the Regional Sports Board takes place at the proposed regional meeting of Local Access Forums to be held in the autumn.

## **6. Local Transport Plan2 – Interim Rights of Way Improvement Plan**

Jackie Brown explained that she had been recently appointed as Simon Wilson's replacement. She informed the Forum that £70,000 had been allocated for works in the targeted areas and would tackle many of the outstanding problems and help the Authority to improve its Best Value Performance Indicators.

Responding to the Forum's questions Jackie explained that the guidance within the ROWIP will be integrated within the LTP2 and a statement is currently being prepared. Targets have been updated for the walking strategy and a Healthy Walking Forum has been established.

In relation to LTP2 Jackie explained that in years 1 and 2 £110,00 was available for rights of way improvement and that it would be helpful to have the Forums' views/observations when making a response to the LTP2 consultation. Members felt that policies within the ROWIP were vague and that they should be more specific.

Regarding questions on targets, Audrey advised that this was the beginning of the process and that a response from the Forum was essential to help achieve the highest level of resources for rights of way improvement.

## **7. Annual Report**

Jackie Brown advised that work was on going on the preparation of the 2004/05 annual report and that a draft would be available for the next meeting.

## **8. Modification Orders**

Following on from the discussion of the previous meeting the Forum requested that an annual update on modification orders be submitted for information. Roger enquired whether there was any progress being made on 'lost ways'. Audrey explained that researching evidence is very time intensive for staff and will usually result in a public inquiry. It was expected that there will be four inquiries this year.

The Chairman agreed to pursue the issue further with the Chairman of the Highways Committee.

## **9. Open Access – Commencement**

Audrey gave an update on the commencement of open access in County Durham. It was explained that 27% of land in County Durham is designated as open access land and that while commencement began on 28 May 2005, County Council preparations have been ongoing for at least one year.

A plan of improvement works was prepared last winter in anticipation of the commencement. These have included the installation of 66 field gates, 56 kissing gates, primary sign boards in Stanhope and Killhope as well as 124 information boards. Funding from the Countryside Agency has contributed the cost of the work. The North Pennines AONB Partnership has also published an information leaflet.

Lindsay Waddell expressed his concern that the method of publicising closures is not very user friendly and that alternative ways of providing the information needs to be explored. Martin Shaw said that he was not aware of any adverse comments at the present time. It was expected that there would be further challenges to be dealt with in the future.

## **10. The Clean Neighbourhoods Act 2005 and the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill**

Audrey gave a brief outline of the The Clean Neighbourhoods Act 2005 and the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill.

The Clean Neighbourhoods Act 2005 received Royal Assent on 7 April 2005 and contained powers to help local authorities improve the quality of the local environment. These include new powers to tackle problems of fly-tipping, litter, fly-posting and graffiti, nuisance vehicles, dogs and noise and waste management. A new power will allow the creation of gateway orders for the installation of gates and barriers in order to restrict access to alleyways/back streets affected by crime/anti social behaviour.

The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill will include provisions to clarify the use of mechanically propelled vehicles on public rights of way.

## **11. Establishment of a North Pennines/AONB Sub Group**

The Forum discussed the possibility of establishing a North Pennines/AONB Sub Group to consider the specific issues affecting the North Pennines area.

Members indicated that they were reluctant to establish a separate group, but felt there might be merit in liaising with Cumbria and Northumberland on relevant issues.

## **12. Agenda items for the Next Meeting**

The following Items were suggested for discussion at the next meeting:

- Permanent closures
- LAF consultations

## **13. Date and Time of Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be held at 6.00 p.m. on Tuesday 13 September 2005 in the Council Chamber of Teesdale District Council, Barnard Castle.