

County Durham Local Access Forum

At a meeting of the **County Durham Local Access Forum** held at Sedgefield Borough Council Offices, Spennymoor on **Monday 31 March 2008** at **6.00 p.m.**

Present:

Geoff Hughes in the Chair

Members of the Forum

Roger Cornwell, Neil Gander, Marilyn Gibson, Bryan Harwood, Bob Kirton-Darling, David Maughan, Bob Pendlebury and Jim Welch.

Officers

Barry Charlton, Audrey Christie, Tammy Morris-Hale (Sedgefield Borough Council) and Mike Ogden

Observer

Jo Bird

Apologies for absence were received from Alan Dougherty and Victoria Lloyd. Steve Scoffin attended but was unable to gain entry to the building.

1. Introduction and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed Neil Gander, Marilyn Gibson and Jim Welch to their first Forum meeting. All Members of the Forum briefly introduced themselves. The Chairman thanked Bryan Harwood for his contribution to the work of the forum as this was his last meeting.

2. In Memory of Barbara Crozier

The Forum was informed that Barbara Crozier had recently passed away and observed a minute's silence in her memory.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 November 2007 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4. Matters Arising

Open Access – Mike Ogden informed the Forum that they had been unable to recruit volunteers to undertake a further survey in March of the use of open countryside.

Access to the Coast – Mike Ogden informed the Forum that County Durham had been chosen as the first pilot area to assess Natural England's methodology

for assessing the quality of access on the coast between Sunderland and Hartlepool. The Forum may be asked by the Local Government Association to make representations to Natural England about the lack of financial support for future maintenance of coastal access.

5. Sedgfield Borough's Countryside

Tammy Morris-Hale, Countryside Officer, Sedgfield Borough Council gave a presentation on the projects that the Borough Council were involved with.

There are 6 local nature reserves in the Borough, four of which are owned by the Borough Council. Management of the reserves is through local 'friends groups' who assist in the maintenance, fundraising, event running and production of management plans for each of the reserves. The six reserves are:

- Ferryhill Carrs
- Byerley Park, Aycliffe
- The Moor, Aycliffe
- Castle Eden Walkway
- Bishop Middleham Wildlife Garden/Castle lake
- Cow Plantation, Spennymoor

Tammy explained that she is also involved with the Magical Meadows project, the Mineral Valleys project and the Local Improvement Plan project. The Borough Council have worked with the County Council to improve rights of way in the Byers Green/Spennymoor/Tudhoe area.

In terms of the future, the countryside walks booklet is being redesigned. Proposals are being discussed to improve the 'three villages' walk in the Trimdons area to provide a good circular walk as part of the 'walk your way to health' project.

The Forum thanked Tammy for her presentation and invited her to attend future meetings to provide progress reports.

6. Rights of Way Improvement Plan

Mike Ogden provided an update on the Rights of Way Improvement Plan. The official launch of the ROWIP was held on 1st February 2008. The Chair and Vice Chair had met with the Leader and Deputy County Treasurer of the County Council to discuss the financial implications of the ROWIP. The Chair and Victoria Lloyd had met with Durham Sport to discuss the links with the physical activity and the health agenda.

A table of ROWIP actions was circulated to the Forum (for copy see file). Members of the Forum were asked if they wished to volunteer to work with officers on the six tasks set out in the table. It was agreed that a copy of the table be circulated to the Forum by email seeking volunteers to work on the tasks set out in the table.

It was suggested that the Forum/Rights of Way should be involved in the Local Area Agreement (LAA). It was agreed that officers should investigate how the Forum/Rights of Way could be involved in the LAA.

Mike Ogden informed the Forum himself and Victoria Lloyd were involved in groups working on Local Government Reorganisation. The Forum might be consulted on where access/rights of way sit in the structure of the new authority.

7. Rights of Way Budget

The Forum considered a briefing note from Neville Noble, Head of Finance and Business Support, Environment explaining how the rights of way budget is being supported (for copy see file).

The Chair explained that he and Steve Scoffin had met with the Leader of the Council, the Deputy County Treasurer and Neville Noble to make representations about a proposed £10,000 reduction in the rights of way budget.

Mike Ogden explained that some of additional resources will be used to acquire an IT based system for managing the rights of way system which is expected to save officer time and resources. Mike Ogden also pointed out that the additional resources were one-off sums, for 2008/9 only, and many were in response to the recommendations of the Scrutiny Report (see item 8). It should also be noted that the funding for rights of way secured through the LTP2 was not a direct replacement for previous cuts in the maintenance budget as LTP2 spending has to be for improvements and to meet strict criteria.

Mike Ogden advised that work with the Area Tourism Partnership was on going on the Walkers are Welcome in Teesdale project. Jo Bird informed the Forum there is local support for the project and a meeting is to take place with County Council staff to discuss sources of funding for the provision of leaflets, way marks and stickers for local businesses to display. An issue about car parking in Middleton in Teesdale needs to be resolved.

The Chairman proposed that the Forum write to the Leader and senior officers to thank them for meeting with the Forum and for reinstating the £10,000 to the rights of way budget and for support to the Rights of Way budget. Additionally an invitation should be extended to the Area Tourism Partnership to attend a future meeting to explain their work and to discuss how the Forum and rights of way can contribute to the local economy.

ACTION

That the Secretary write to the Leader and Senior officers of the County Council to thank them for meeting with the Forum and for reinstating the £10,000 to the rights of way budget. Officers contact the ATP to establish links and possible attendance at a future meeting.

8. Access to the Countryside Scrutiny Project

The Forum considered a letter from the Head of Corporate Estates in relation to the dedication of suitable County Council land for open access (for copy see file).

It was suggested that the Secretary e-mail a link to the web based County Council GIS system to Members of the Forum. After examining County Council land ownership Members are asked to propose possible areas for dedication as open access. A number of these will be submitted to the Estates Division to see how they respond to the request.

ACTION

That Member's of the Forum be asked to identify potential sites for dedication as open access land.

9. Regional Issues

The Forum considered the notes of the regional Chairs/Vice Chairs meeting held on 17 January (for copy see file). The next meeting is to be held on 23 April and any member interested in attending as a substitute for the Chairman is asked to let the Secretary know as soon as possible.

10. National Issues

Mike Ogden explained that Steve Scoffin had attended the National LAF Chairs meeting with Natural England held on 24 January 2008 as one of the regional representatives.

The meeting had been arranged to give LAF's a voice at national level. The meeting had agreed to establish an English Access Forum which will have 16 members comprising two representatives from each region. A further meeting will take place in May 2008.

11. Annual Report 2006/07 & 2007/08

Mike Ogden informed the Forum that the Annual Reports for 2006/07 and 2007/08 would be published as soon as possible.

12. Recruitment to the Forum - Membership

The Secretary informed the Forum that Gael Dixon, Bryan Harwood, Bob Kirton-Darling, and William Salvin had advised that they wished to stand down from the Forum. Bob Kirton-Darling agreed to reconsider his decision about retiring from the Forum.

Following the recent recruitment of three new members, Mike Ogden advised that further interviews to recruit additional members would be held in due course.

It was agreed that the Secretary would write to the retiring members to thank them for their work

ACTION

That the Secretary writes to the retiring members to thank them for their work.

13. Agenda items for the next meeting

The following items were suggested for inclusion on the agenda for the next meeting:

ROWIP

Access to the Coast

Dedication of Land

National and Regional Issues

ACTION

Chair/Vice Chair to meet with officers to agree agenda items for the next meeting.

14. Date and time of the next meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting will be held at a location to be agreed on the coast on Monday 30 June 2008 at 6.00 p.m. Prior to the meeting a site visit will be held at 4.30 p.m.