

County Durham Local Access Forum

At a meeting of the **County Durham Local Access Forum** held at County Hall Durham on **Thursday 28 September 2006** at **6.00 p.m.**

Present:

Geoff Hughes in the Chair

Members of the Forum

Barbara Crozier, Alan Dougherty, Gael Dixon, Bryan Harwood, Brian Hodgson, Bob Pendlebury

Officers

Barry Charlton, Audrey Christie, Mike Ogden, Chris Pope (Natural England) and Nick Mason North Pennines AONB Partnership

Apologies for absence were received from Roger Cornwell, David Maughan, Steve Scoffin, Lindsey Waddell and Fred Wright.

1. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 July 2006 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2. Matters Arising

Dedication of land – The issue of the dedication of County Council land will be dealt with at Item 8. Mike Ogden explained that he had previously advised that they had been successful in a bid to host a dedication demonstration project. However, before the post could be advertised he was advised that there was a moratorium on all spending for the time being. DEFRA are undertaking a review of their spending and an indication of whether the project can go ahead will be notified in due course.

Annual Report – It was explained that in the absence of an introduction from the previous Chair, a foreword will be agreed to enable the annual report to be published as soon as possible.

Coastal/River Access – At the present time there is no further information. It was suggested that an item be included on the agenda of the next meeting. In relation to access to rivers it was explained that the publication of a report on the outcome of the four pilot projects on voluntary access agreements was expected very shortly. It was proposed that this also could be discussed at the next meeting.

Action

That an update on the position of coastal and river access be discussed at the next meeting of the Forum.

3. Pack Horse Trails in the North Pennines AONB

A presentation was received from Nick Mason, Unique North Pennines Development Officer for the North Pennines AONB Partnership on the development of Pack Horse Trails.

The Unique North Pennines project was a large landscape conservation project which will be substantially funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). Included in the project will be subsidiary project entitled 'In the Footsteps of Pack Ponies' which will develop a series of long distance trails to meet equestrian needs. Two of the routes will be in Teesdale at:-

- Hamsterley to Eggleston
- Across Cotherstone Moor

These routes will follow existing bridleways. Funding is being sought from the HLF for infrastructure works to improve what already exists and to promote the routes. The routes have been selected where there is historic evidence of pack horse use, are served by existing equestrian businesses and have the appropriate legal status. Total cost of the works is approximately £54,000 with HLF providing 65% of the cost. Match funding is needed to complete the funding of the project. Landowners along the routes are to be consulted and there is also a need to discuss the long term maintenance of the routes. It is expected that the project will commence next autumn and be completed within three years.

In response to questions about connections with the existing network it was explained that connections with existing bridleways had not been initially considered. However, there was an opportunity for the Hamsterley route to connect to the South West Durham Heritage route. It was confirmed that it was not proposed to change the surface other than to resolve drainage issues. The Forum welcomed the project and expressed the view that hopefully that this was the beginning of a much wider network for equestrian users.

Action

The Forum agreed to endorse the proposals to develop the new equestrian routes.

4. "Outdoors for All" – DEFRA Draft Diversity Action Plan

The Forum considered the DEFRA Draft Diversity Action Plan "Outdoors for All" (for copy see file).

The Forum welcomed the work on the diversity agenda and the emphasis on equal opportunities for all and recognised the importance of reducing barriers to participation. The Forum agreed to comment on questions 12 and 13 in the consultation as set out below:

- Q12 The role of Local Access Forums needs to be reinforced, as there is feeling local authorities and other agencies undervalue their contribution. Local Access Forums are small organisations with very

limited resources and therefore additional funding will be necessary to meet the new challenges. Ensuring that Local Access Forums and their work are properly supported and resourced could help achieve this. The County Durham Local Access Forum does feel that it has an important role to play in developing the diversity agenda.

- Q13 The County Durham Local Access Forum does not feel that there is a need to create additional forums. This is likely to lead to confusion and overlap of responsibility. We think it is important to use and develop the existing linkages to broaden the diversity agenda.

Action

That a response be made to DEFRA along the above lines and that copy of the response be forwarded to all Members of the Forum.

5. Regional Co-ordination - Update

The Forum was informed of the current position on the arrangement of a Regional Forum meeting following the cancellation of the event in September.

Martin Shaw of the Countryside Agency was trying to arrange a training event for new LAF members and a meeting of Chairs and Vice Chairs on the 13 December. The Forum welcomed the lead of the Agency in arranging the event on 13 December.

The Forum were also advised that a liaison meeting between Northumberland and Cumbria LAF's was taking place today at the AONB Offices in Stanhope which County Durham LAF representatives were unable to attend.

6. Open Access - Update

Mike Ogden circulated the latest North Pennines AONB leaflet of walks and gave an update on the progress of implementing Open Access. Additional funding which had been previously offered for implementing nature conservation restrictions had been clawed back by the Countryside Agency because of the DEFRA spending review leaving the County Council with a shortfall of £4,500.

A review meeting is to take place in October about Holwick Craggs. The County Council, Countryside Agency or English Nature has not received any feedback following the opening of access to Holwick Craggs.

A meeting to discuss the monitoring of open access is to take place with other authorities in 2 weeks time. There is currently no funding available at the present time to undertake this work and it is unlikely that this work will be carried out.

In relation to reviewing existing nature conservation restrictions, Chris Pope explained that reviews of the restrictions are to be undertaken and said she would keep the Forum informed of progress.

7. Rights of Way Improvement Plan

Mike Ogden gave an update on the progress of work on the ROWIP. Feedback has been received on the questionnaire which covered many different issues.

Mike explained that Jackie Salmon was leaving the Authority tomorrow to take up a new post. If it was not possible to fill the post in the very near future it was possible that the draft plan might not be produced by the end of 2006.

Members of the Forum were very concerned that the publication of the ROWIP might be delayed or may not be completed to the highest standards. It was suggested that a letter be sent to John Richardson, Corporate Director, Environment requesting that the post be filled as soon as possible and that work on the ROWIP be completed. The Forum recognises the need to produce a good quality document to assist in attracting additional funding from outside bodies.

Action

That a letter be sent from the Chair to John Richardson, Corporate Director Environment requesting that post previously held by Jackie Salmon be filled as soon as possible in order to complete work on the ROWIP.

8. Access to the Countryside Scrutiny Project

Mike Ogden gave an update on the progress of implementing the recommendations of the Access to the Countryside Scrutiny project. The Environment Management Team had discussed the next steps on the recommendations and it was felt that the completion of the ROWIP is vital in assisting this process. In relation to the dedication of land, a letter had been sent to the Acting Director of Corporate Services seeking an audit of the Council's land to identify sites suitable for dedication. The reply had not been very encouraging and this issue will be further discussed with the Head of Service.

Following the last meeting the Chair explained that it was felt that some progress on this issue was being made and it was decided to postpone writing to the Minister at the present time. However, if no further progress is being made, discussions will take place with officers to decide the best way to take this forward.

The Forum asked that the issue be included on the agenda of a future meeting following the progress review of the project by the Looking After the Environment Scrutiny Sub Committee and the Cabinet.

Action

1. That in the absence of any progress on dedication of land, the Chair in consultation with officers be authorised to take appropriate action.
2. That the project be discussed at a future meeting of the Forum when the outcome of the review meetings is available.

9. Venue of Forum Meetings

Member's views on the venue of future meeting were sought in light of the poor attendance at the previous meeting which was held at Stanhope. Members expressed the view that the next meeting be held at County Hall and that the following meeting be held at an outside location.

Action

That the next meeting be held at County Hall Durham with the location of the following meeting to be decided at that meeting.

10. Agenda items for the Next Meeting

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

- ROWIP
- Scrutiny Report
- Coastal/RiverAccess
- North Pennine Nature Conservation Closures

The next meeting will be held at 6.00 p.m. on Wednesday 17 January 2007 at County Hall Durham.

11. Access to Mickle Fell/Ministry of Defence Land

The Forum considered a list of issues prepared by Alan Dougherty relating to access to the Mickle Fell area and Ministry of Defence land in general (for copy see file).

Alan Dougherty explained that the MOD are meeting with the BMC shortly and seem to be interested in promoting access. A large part of the Mickle Fell area is outside of the primary impact zone and it is not felt that unexploded ordnance is a major problem.

It was suggested that this might be raised this as a regional issue as the areas concerned are valuable for promoting open access.

Brian Harwood explained that in Northumberland ongoing discussions with MOD estates had established that access was available to the Otterburn ranges except in the primary impact zones.

It was suggested that a representative of MOD Estates be invited to the next meeting of the Forum to discuss access to Mickle Fell.

Action

That a representative of MOD Estates be invited to attend the next meeting of the Forum to discuss access to Mickle Fell.