

## County Durham Local Access Forum

At a meeting of the **County Durham Local Access Forum** held at County Hall Durham on **Monday 29 September 2008 at 6.00 p.m.**

**Present:**

**Geoff Hughes** in the Chair

**Members of the Forum**

Roger Cornwell, Marilyn Gibson, Gary Haley, Bob Pendlebury, Steve Scoffin and Jim Welch

**Officers**

Barry Charlton, Mike Ogden, Audrey Christie and Victoria Lloyd

**Observers**

Jo Bird and Ian Martin

Apologies for absence were received from Bob Kirton-Darling, David Maughan, Councillor A Turner and Grace Wali.

### **1. County Durham Tourism Partnership**

The Forum received a presentation from Melanie Sensicle, Chief Executive of the County Durham Tourism Partnership explaining the work and role of the Partnership.

It was explained that CDTP is a private public partnership which acts as the County tourism team. The Partnership has been in operation since June 2006 and now employs ten staff who operate across a broad range of activities.

The visitor economy is worth over £600M per annum to County Durham and is a big part of the economy which supports 12,000 jobs. There are 17 million visitors to County Durham every year and this accounts for 10% of the local economy.

County Durham Tourism Partnership's remit is the strategic leadership and co-ordination of tourism across the County. CDTP is a not for profit private sector lead company with a board of directors who mostly come from the private sector with many of them operating tourism businesses in the County.

Funding is provided by One Northeast, the County Council, District Councils and also the private sector. CDTP's main purpose is to ensure that tourism contributes as much as possible to the economy of Durham. It is one of four tourism partnerships in the region, the others being Northumberland Tourism, Tourism Tyne and Wear and Visit Tees Valley who all work together as part of tourism network along with the tourism staff of One Northeast.

What CDTP does is destination management. There are over 800 tourism businesses in County Durham and because they work unilaterally it is unlikely that they would produce a destination that visitors from outside of the area would understand, know about and want to visit. Destination management falls in into six broad areas:

- Business support – advice on how to perform better, information, opportunities for training and other support initiatives;
- Information to visitors
- Marketing - clear and compelling messages
- Product development
- Visitor experience- ensure that there is good quality service
- Workplace development

County Durham has the opportunity to orient itself towards the service economy in order to derive the maximum benefit possible from visitors to the County. Before the establishment of CDTP there was no hotels association, no attractions forum and no events group and tourism was seen as a low key activity. These groups and others have now been established and they help give business continuity and a collective voice.

The Partnership is also about engagement with other groups, forums and networks to make sure everyone understands each other's agenda and that everyone is working co-operatively.

One of the most important areas that CDTP is involved in is strategic planning and development. They produce an Area Tourism Management Plan which sets out how tourism is to be taken forward in the County. It sets out a number of priorities in order to give visitors a good experience. It is known that there are not enough attractions in Durham with the average visit to the City lasting 1½ hours. This needs to be extended to derive additional economic benefit from visitors. Visitors to rural areas of the County tend to stay longer but are involved in activities which do not generate much economic benefit. This is because there not enough businesses in the rural areas to attract the spending. The Area Tourism Management Plan also contains information about access, countryside activities, city walks etc. Durham City is the County's main attraction but there are a number of access issues such as no direct bus route from Durham to Beamish Museum which need to be resolved if the rest of the County is to thrive.

CDTP is also involved in strategic marketing and run campaigns to present what there is. The most recent campaign was 'peace and tranquillity' and visitor attractions created 25 events across the County on that theme. This received good press coverage which has featured High Force and the Durham coast. Another campaign was centred on 'outdoors and active' which covered easy walks to extreme sports which are all available in the County. The Partnership is also involved in managing information. Information is gathered and inputted into a regional database and this is published across the world through [visitbritain.com](http://visitbritain.com), [enjoyengland.com](http://enjoyengland.com) [visitsoutheastengland.com](http://visitsoutheastengland.com) and [visitcountydurham.com](http://visitcountydurham.com).

It was stressed that visitor experience is very important and that in terms of access, it is important that rights of way are well signed and visitors are able to find their way around the County.

Bob Pendlebury asked whether the area has been able to attract overseas visitors. Melanie Sensicle explained that the main European markets are still robust although the American market is in poor shape at the present time. Work is ongoing with Britain's Heritage Cities which helps Durham to promote itself to the North American, Canadian and other English speaking countries. Air routes from Newcastle with Emirates to Australia are opening new markets.

Jim Welch pointed out that there are no hotels in Durham where the staff have disability awareness training. Melanie Sensicle informed the Forum that as part of CDTP's information gathering role they contact tourism businesses about the accessibility of their business and include this information on their database.

The Chairman advised Melanie that the County Council had published its Rights of Way Improvement Plan. It was agreed that a copy of which would be forwarded to CDTP with a request that the contents be taken into account in developing a collaborative approach. It was hoped that the CDTP and the Forum would be able to work together to improve the areas identified within the plan for the benefit of residents and visitors to the County. Melanie Sensicle was thanked for her presentation.

## **2. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 September 2008 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

## **3. Matters Arising**

**Local Area Agreement** – Barry Charlton referred the Forum to the copy of the email at Item 3(a) which had been received from the Project Manager for the LAA. If the Forum has any strong views these should be channelled through Maggie Bosanquet or Claire Morris who are the contacts for Sustainability and Environment Partnership. It was agreed that Grace Wali be invited to take the lead on exploring the opportunity for the LAF to maximise the benefits that might arise from linking with the LAA

**Feedback from Site Visit** – Barry Charlton informed the Forum that he had passed Jim Welch's comments onto Niall Benson. Niall Benson had advised that his suggestion would be added to the list of potential improvements to be undertaken, dependent on the availability of finance.

**Access to the Coast** – Mike Ogden circulated plans of the existing bridleways, cycle routes and the coastal path. This confirms that there is good pedestrian access, the existing cycle routes are mainly along existing roads and the bridleway provision is generally poor. The Chairman informed the Forum that he had walked the coastal path and felt that it would be difficult

to provide a continuous route for cyclists and riders. Marilyn Gibson was of the view that an equestrian route might be possible if access could be obtained to a field edge in the vicinity of Foxhole Gill together with the use of some of the beaches. She advised that Sunderland City Council were upgrading a section of the coastal path between Hendon and the County boundary which would be available to equestrian users. Roger Cornwell advised that there is a problem with access from the County boundary to Seaham Hall. Mike Ogden explained that this is being addressed through a Stewardship agreement which will provide access. Victoria Lloyd informed the Forum that the County Council is working with Natural England in the east of the County to address the gap in bridleways by asking them to prioritise access as part of the stewardship agreements. Landowners are asked to agree to a permissive bridleway on existing footpaths or where is a gap. It was agreed that these views be forwarded to the Heritage Coast Officer and that they are taken into account in furthering opportunities for coastal access.

**Introduction to County Durham Countryside Sites** – Steve Scoffin informed the Forum that many of the former picnic sites along the A68 are closed. These could be used as a base to access the countryside in the surrounding area. The Forum agreed to invite the appropriate member of staff to attend the next meeting to explain why they were no longer available and discuss the wider issues of provision and management of countryside sites.

#### **ACTION**

Request the attendance of a member of staff responsible for the management of countryside sites.

#### **4. Reassessment of CROW Nature Conservation Assessments**

The Forum considered a report prepared by Alan Dougherty on the meeting arranged by Natural England that he had attended on 17 September on the reassessment of CROW nature conservation assessments (for copy see file of Minutes).

Alan informed the Forum that officers from Durham and Northumberland had stressed the low levels of use. It appears that no research is being undertaken into the decline of the black grouse and it appeared that access had little effect on its decline. He suggested that it would be helpful if the Forum could write to Natural England to remind them of their commitment to the least restrictive principle and to emphasise the need for research on which to base their decisions. Mike Ogden informed the Forum that he had just received notes from the meeting and this seemed to suggest that in terms of some of the sites in County Durham, the restrictions would be reduced or removed.

#### **ACTION**

That the Forum writes to Natural England to remind them of their commitment to the least restrictive principle and to emphasise the need for research on which to base their decisions.

## **5. Access to the Coast**

Mike Ogden provided an update to the Forum on the proposals to provide access to the coast. Two Parliamentary Committees have examined the proposals in the draft Bill and have made recommendations. Natural England is currently commenting on the recommendations. One of the main recommendations is that “parks and gardens” would be excluded from access. There is concern that this will stop a continuous route around the coast and require significant diversions. Alan Dougherty suggested that the Forum should write to Natural England to ask them to clarify the definition of parks and gardens.

Steve Scoffin informed the Forum that at the meeting of the England Access Forum he had gained the impression that Natural England were minded to take account of the recommendation that parks and gardens be excluded. Steve Scoffin explained that the report of the England Access Forum meeting will say that there is considerable time pressure on legislation and that it is possible that sections of the Marine Bill could be cut to allow its passage. It was agreed that the Forum should write to local MP's to ask that the coastal access provisions of the Marine Bill be kept in the passage of the legislation.

### **ACTION**

That the Forum writes to local MP's to ask them to support the coastal access provisions of the Marine Bill.

## **6. Rights of Way Improvement Plan**

(a) Active Durham 2010 – The Chairman informed the Forum that the proposal for this project had arisen from meetings he had attended involving the Chief Executive of the County Council and Durham Sport. The project will deliver a co-ordinated branded year of activities and events to improve health, engage people in sport, increase participation in physical activity and raise awareness and increase use of the outdoor environment across County Durham. It is expected that the project will help address health inequalities in the County. British Triathlon is working with Durham Sport and is interested in holding an event for tri-athletes on the Durham coast next year as part of the preparations for 2010.

(b) County Durham Walking Forum – Jim Welch reported that he had attended the meeting held on 16 September with representation from a wide range of organisations. Discussion took place on how to promote walking and access in County Durham. Representatives were interested to hear about the benefits that access to the countryside gives to disabled people.

(c) Update on Pilot Area Studies – Victoria Lloyd reported that Natural England is interested in the pilot area studies and she will be preparing a project proposal for submission. LAF members who had expressed an interest in being involved in a sub group to pursue would be involved at the appropriate time

(d) Equestrian Access East Durham – Dealt with under matters arising.

(e) Easington Green Exercise Partnerships – Victoria Lloyd informed the Forum that good progress has been made. Funding is being sought for a post to commence next April which will enable further progress.

## **7. Local Government Reorganisation - Update**

Mike Ogden informed the Forum that the new Chief Executive George Garlick, took up his post on 22 September. Work is under way to recruit the corporate directors who will form the senior management structure. The new council will be called Durham County Council. It is not clear where Rights of Way will be placed in the structure of the new council. The LAF members agreed that they wished to be involved in consultations that may take place regarding the proposals for the countryside function in the new authority.

## **8. Access to the Countryside Scrutiny Project – Dedication of Land**

Barry Charlton informed the Forum that the areas of land suggested for dedication have been passed to the Estates Division. The member of staff dealing with this has moved onto another post. Follow up enquiries with Estates have revealed that no progress has been made to date.

The Chairman explained that the Forum have been pressing Estates for progress on the issue of dedication since the completion of the Access to the Countryside Scrutiny Project in 2006. The Chairman has met with the Acting Chief Executive to express his concern about the lack of progress. He has subsequently written to John Richardson to update him on the current position and a response is still awaited. If there is no response in the near future it was suggested that the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny should be informed of the lack of progress in implementing the recommendation.

### **ACTION**

That in the absence of any progress or a response, that a letter be sent to the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee advising of the lack of progress in implementing the recommendation on dedication of land.

## **9. Consultation on the Disposal of Land**

The Forum considered a consultation on a number of areas of land which are considered for disposal and might be suitable for dedication as open access land.

In relation to the area of land marked '4' Steve Scoffin informed the Forum that the former Great North Forest had been in long discussions with the County Council on the creation of a cycle route which would link the Bowes Valley railway path and the Sunderland to Consett railway path. This would also allow people to access land owned by the Woodland Trust.

## **ACTION**

That the comments received be submitted as the Forums response to the consultation.

## **10. National Regional Issues**

Steve Scoffin updated the Forum on the LAF Chairs and Vice Chairs meeting which had taken place on 9 July 2008 and the England Access Forum which had taken place on 23 September:

### Regional Meeting

- The meeting was attended by Richard Hall a senior policy adviser with Natural England and the Chair of the North East Environment Forum who talked about the North East Strategy for the Environment. Allan Pollock, Chair of the Tyne and Wear LAF was invited to attend meetings of the North East Environment Forum to give an input from the LAF perspective.
- Cara Courage also gave a PowerPoint presentation on Natural England's manifesto. It was agreed that a representative of Natural England should be invited to the next meeting of the Forum.
- Consideration is being given to producing a regional newsletter which is being championed by Beryl Bird the Development Officer for Tees Valley LAF.
- The next Chairs and Vice Chairs meeting will take place on 5 November.

### England Access Forum

- Natural England is looking to roll-out regional support for LAF's. They will be appointing part-time co-ordinators for each region.
- Natural England are commissioning a review of trails and routes and plan to consult stakeholders on its future proposals for trails and routes when the review is completed.
- Natural England circulated their draft policy on Access. The policy has five key policies. Natural England will commence formal consultation at a later date.
- Coastal access (see above)
- MOD proposals for training outside of existing approved areas.

## **11. Annual Report 2008/9**

The Forum discussed and agreed that a similar approach to that adopted in the past should be taken in the production of the Annual Report for 2008/09.

## **12. Recruitment to the Forum**

Mike Ogden informed the Forum that there was no change in membership at the Present time.

### **13. Information Items**

- (a) An invitation to attend a key leader event on the Mineral Valleys Project has been received – Steve Scoffin is to attend the event on behalf of the LAF.
- (b) Durham County Council Local Development Framework – It was agreed that the LAF should ask to be included in the public participation database.
- (c) CRN Conference Growing Up Outdoors – details of the conference were circulated for information.

### **14. Agenda items for the next meeting**

It was agreed that in addition to the usual items, that the following issues be included on the agenda for the next meeting:

- Attendance of Natural England
- Attendance of Countryside staff – countryside sites
- Estates staff attendance (dependent on response from Chair of Overview and Scrutiny)

### **15. Date, time and venue for the next meeting**

It was agreed that the next meeting will be held at County Hall Durham on Monday 12 January 2009 starting at 6.00 p.m.

### **16. Stockton on Tees Borough Council Rights of Way Improvement Plan**

Steve Scoffin informed the Forum that Stockton on Tees Borough Council have produced their draft Rights of Way Improvement Plan for consultation. There are a number of cross border issues and the County Council has been consulted. It was agreed that any issues of strategic significance be brought to the attention of the LAF.