

County Durham Local Access Forum

At a meeting of the **County Durham Local Access Forum** held at County Hall Durham on **Monday 12 January 2009** at **6.00 p.m.**

Present:

Geoff Hughes in the Chair

Members of the Forum

Roger Cornwell, Neil Gander, Marilyn Gibson, Bob Kirton-Darling, David Maughan, Steve Scoffin and Jim Welch

Officers

Barry Charlton, Mike Ogden, Audrey Christie Victoria Lloyd, Jo Maclean (Items 1-4) and Andy Niven (Items 1-5) (Durham County Council) and Jim Milner (Natural England)

Observers

Jo Bird

Apologies for absence were received from Alan Dougherty, Gary Haley and Brian Hodgson. The following members were not in attendance – Bob Pendlebury, Councillor Andy Turner and Grace Wali.

1. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 September 2008 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2. Matters Arising

County Durham Tourism Partnership – Barry Charlton informed the Forum that he had written to the County Durham Tourism Partnership forwarding a copy of the ROWIP. The letter referred to the six tourism action points and sought their views on how CDTP and the Forum could work together to take these forward. Victoria Lloyd advised that she had been invited by CDTP to attend a meeting to discuss upcoming events.

LAA – It was **agreed** to ask Grace Wali if she was prepared to lead on the links with the LAA and report to the next meeting.

Coastal Access/Marine and Coastal Access Bill - Barry Charlton informed the Forum that he had written to local MP's seeking their support for the Marine and Coastal Access Bill.

3. Management of Countryside Sites

The Forum received an overview of the County Council's countryside sites from Andy Niven, Section Manager, Sites Rangers and Ecology.

The countryside estate is approximately 3,000 hectares and comprises 70 sites which include picnic areas, country parks, railway paths and areas of woodland. These are managed for bio-diversity and public access. The largest area of the estate that is open for access is the 110km of railway walks which are open to pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders. Following the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 the Council has removed all obstacles including horse stiles to the railway walks. The Council has promoted disabled access and has provided easy access routes at five sites. The issue of easy access is taken into consideration on all new projects. Nearly all parking areas will have a designated disabled space on tarmac to enable access for disabled people.

It was explained that several countryside sites have been closed at the request of the police as a result of anti social behaviour. Other sites are closed on a temporary basis to try and address problems.

The major issue for countryside sites is the lack of funding and maintenance costs can be substantial if undertaken to the correct standards. It is estimated that one third of income is grant aided. The sites receive approximately 3 million visits per annum and feedback from visitors is generally positive except in terms of maintenance issues.

Roger Cornwell asked whether it is possible for the Council to designate land adjacent to Waldrige Fell and Chapmans Well as open access land. Andy Niven advised that this would need to be a policy decision of the Council, although he would have no objection to it being designated as open access land.

In response to Steve Scoffin's questions, Andy Niven advised that he was unable to give an indication when the A68 sites would be reopened. There have been considerable problems at the Collier Wood site and on neighbouring land. It was explained that grant aid came mainly from the Forestry Commission, CDENT and from stewardship.

In relation to the Hardwick Park visitor centre Andy Niven explained that the project had been delayed. The building is almost complete and it is expected that the car park and toilets will be available for use towards the end of February. Whilst the site is finished other infrastructure works such as seating, bins and signing need to be completed. It is hoped to open the visitor centre in April but it is more likely to be open in June/July. A Visitor Services Officer has been appointed and will be on site from February. Two seasonal rangers have been appointed and the advert for the Education Officer is about to be published.

Andy offered the use of the visitor centre for a future Forum meeting. The Forum thanked him for attending the meeting.

4. Access to the Countryside Scrutiny Project – Dedication of Land

The Chairman advised that he and the Vice Chair had met with Councillor Armstrong to discuss the Forum's frustration with the lack of progress on the dedication of land.

Joanne Maclean, Estates Officer informed the Forum that the County Council is committed to exploring the dedication of sites. As a result of Local Government Reorganisation any work on this issue will need to be deferred until the Council have full ownership details of both County Council and District Council land. Joanne advised that it would be better if the Forum liaised with the land and property work stream for LGR and explained that she had asked that the issue be raised at the next work stream meeting so that they are able to provide a named contact. In the meantime any further queries on this issue can be directed through Joanne.

Forum members pointed out that this had been ongoing for at least 2 years and was of the view that putting off the work because of LGR was likely to lead to further delay. Joanne Maclean explained that the County Council had made a firm commitment to dedication but from an officer view she could not recommend dedication until such time as work on District Council land has been completed.

Joanne MacLean was informed that Members of the Forum had been asked to suggest areas of land suitable for dedication and had provided this information to Estates last summer and were firmly of the view that the County Council should give an answer as soon as possible on whether these sites are suitable for dedication. Joanne Maclean agreed that she would provide a response on the sites identified by the Forum at the next meeting.

ACTION

It was agreed to write to Councillor Armstrong thanking him for the opportunity to meet and to explain the LAF's position on the sites that they had been requested to identify.

5. Update from Natural England

The Forum received an update from Jim Milner on the work of Natural England in relation to the work of the Local Access Forum.

Jim Milner explained that the work in relation to access had been divided into two areas. Kevin Vigars will be supporting the work of LAF's, national trails etc, while he would be involved in the agri-environment side of access. It was explained that NE has insufficient resources and one of the funding streams which is buoyant is the Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) funding stream. NE will try to make better use of this funding to improve access, particularly for national trails (i.e. Pennine Way). Work will be undertaken to identify the missing links and areas which need further work.

Work is also underway to identify LAF training needs, the appointment of a regional training co-ordinator and the publication of a newsletter.

In relation to coastal access Jim Milner informed the Forum that NE had published a draft scheme which explains how they will approach the implementation of coastal access. An area of the Northumberland coast is being used to pilot the implementation of coastal access. The Chairman suggested that it would be helpful to receive a written briefing on the implementation and the progress of the Bill.

Steve Scoffin drew attention to the recent publication of the Defra document 'A strategy for promoting an integrated approach to the management of coastal areas in England' and pointed out that the document does not mention coastal access or the rights of way network. He requested that this issue be raised with Cara Courage so that it can be included in the next version of the document.

Marilyn Gibson and Steve Scoffin updated the Forum on their attendance at the National Trails and Routes events. NE is examining standards for the national trails and is also reviewing recreational routes. It was pointed out that there is an ongoing consultation on National Trails and Routes and the LAF could respond to this. Following discussion it was agreed that Steve Scoffin and Marilyn Gibson would draft a response on behalf of the Forum.

ACTION

Marliyn Gibson and Steve Scoffin to draft response.

6. Rights of Way Improvement Plan

(a) Active Durham 2010 – The Forum was updated on the progress of the 'Active Durham 2010' initiative which is to help encourage people to participate in outdoor activities. Initially this was to hold a year of physical activities, sport and helping the environment. However, as a result of the support of the Primary Care Trust (PCT) it will be possible to expand this into future years. Resources will be held by County Durham Sport and used by partners to deliver the projects. The resources can be used to improve physical infrastructure including the rights of way network. It was **agreed** that the Chairman would remain as the future point of contact with this initiative and he agreed to report back to future meetings.

(b) Update on Pilot Area Studies – Roger Cornwell provided an update on the development of the pilot areas studies. The project proposal has been completed and will be submitted to NE although the methodology of the access audit needs further work. It was **agreed** to report progress to future meeting.

(c) Landowner Actions – David Maughan and Bob Kirton-Darling informed the Forum that they had reviewed the landowner leaflet and given feedback. The leaflet will be available for circulation to farmers/landowners by March. The CLA and NFU have agreed to the use of their logos on the leaflet.

Victoria Lloyd/Audrey Christie updated the Forum on the following ROWIP actions:

- A business case has been submitted for new countryside management system
- Bid has been submitted as part of housing growth points – provision of green infrastructure
- Work has been undertaken on the creation of a multi user route alongside the Weardale railway between Witton le Wear and Low Barnes Nature Reserve. There may be an opportunity to extend the route. The Forum agreed to endorse the project.
- An inventory of urban paths in the twelve largest urban settlements is to be undertaken. This will enable the paths to be inspected and maintained on a regular basis.

7. Local Government Reorganisation - Update

Mike Ogden informed the Forum that since the last meeting the Directors and most of the Heads of Service have been appointed. The rights of way section will be part of the Regeneration and Economic Development Department under the Head of Transport. Countryside Sites and Rangers will be part of Sport and Leisure in the Neighbourhood Services Department.

It was **agreed** to keep the LAF advised of progress.

8. National/Regional Issues

Steve Scoffin updated the Forum on the LAF Chairs and Vice Chairs meeting which had taken place on 5 November 2008 (copy of notes **attached**)

The Forum was advised that work was underway on the appointment of a Regional LAF Co-ordinator and it was expected that a letter will be circulated to the appointing authorities soon. The Forum urged that regional LAF training be arranged as soon as possible to ensure that the training allocation is used during this financial year.

9. Annual Report 2008/9

Victoria Lloyd informed the Forum that a draft of the Annual Report for 2008/9 has been produced in conjunction with Steve Scoffin. A copy of the draft report will be circulated and Members were asked to check and update their personal profile. In addition Members were asked to provide information highlighting the work carried out by the Forum during the year.

The following members agreed to write sections as follows:

- Noses Point Site Visit – Jim Welch
- Pilot Area Access Studies – Roger Cornwell
- Active Durham – Geoff Hughes
- Landowner Leaflet – David Maughan

10. Recruitment to the Forum

Mike Ogden informed the Forum that there was no change in membership at the present time. The launch of the landowner leaflet might be an opportunity to recruit new landowner representatives.

11. Stockton on Tees Borough Council Rights of Way Improvement Plan

The Chairman informed the Forum that he had examined the Stockton on Tees Borough Council ROWIP and felt there were a number of cross border issues which needed to be addressed. He suggested that each Member could with officer guidance take a lead when issues arise with a neighbouring authority. Steve Scoffin commented that any cross border audit should be undertaken by Tees Valley JLAF rather than on an authority basis.

The Forum **agreed** to support this approach.

12. Information Items

(a) Invitation to Cumbria LAF meeting – Victoria Lloyd informed the Forum that she had been invited to attend the Cumbria LAF meeting on 2nd March. Any Member wishing to attend should contact Victoria.

(b) Planning for Health 12th February - Victoria Lloyd informed the Forum that she is organising an information sharing meeting with a guest speaker from the North East Obesogenic Network. Any Member wishing to attend should contact Victoria.

(c) National Trails and Routes – dealt with under Item No 5.

(d) Mineral Valleys project key Leaders Event – Steve Scoffin advised that he had attended the event on behalf of the Forum.

13. Agenda items for the next meeting

Members were reminded to contact the Secretary if they have any items they wish to be included on the agenda. It was agreed that the Forestry Commission should be invited to attend the next meeting to discuss their recreation policy.

14. Date, time and venue for the next meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting will be held at Hardwick Park Visitor Centre, Sedgefield on Monday 20 April 2009 starting at 6.00 p.m. It was proposed that a site visit be undertaken before the meeting.