

County Durham Local Access Forum

At a meeting of the **County Durham Local Access Forum** held at the Visitor Centre Hardwick Park, Sedgfield on **Monday 27 April 2009** at **6.00 p.m.**

Present:

Geoff Hughes in the Chair

Members of the Forum

Roger Cornwell, Alan Dougherty, Marilyn Gibson, Brian Hodgson, David Maughan, Steve Scoffin and Jim Welch

Officers

Barry Charlton, Mike Ogden, Audrey Christie, Victoria Lloyd and Andy Niven (Items 1-3) (Durham County Council)

Observer

Jo Bird

Apologies for absence were received from Neil Gander, Gary Haley, Bob Kirton-Darling and Bob Pendlebury. The following members were not in attendance:-Councillor Andy Turner and Grace Wali.

1. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2009 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2. Matters Arising

County Durham Tourism Partnership – Barry Charlton informed the Forum that a reminder had been sent to the County Durham Tourism Partnership seeking their views on how the Forum and the Partnership can work together.

LAA – In the absence of Grace Wali this will be held over to the next meeting. It was agreed to contact Grace to see if she was in a position to take this area of work forward.

ACTION: Barry Charlton

Coastal Access/Marine and Coastal Access Bill – Mike Ogden circulated a copy of the most recent Access Newsletter on the Marine and Coastal Access Bill together with a paper explaining how the process for consultation and representations on the route will work. Local Access Forums will be part of the consultation process.

Management of Countryside Sites – Andy Niven informed the Forum that the sites off the A68 (Collier Wood and High Houselop) are still closed on Police advice although the Beamish sites have been re-opened. The position on closure is under constant review depending on Police advice.

Dedication of Land – The Chairman informed the Forum that he had been in correspondence with the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Management Board, Councillor J Armstrong on dedication of land. Councillor Armstrong's reply had indicated that the position on dedication should be clearer by September. It was agreed that a letter should be sent to Councillor Armstrong saying that the Forum were looking forward to making progress on this issue in September.

ACTION: Barry Charlton to draft letter on behalf of the Chairman

Local Government Reorganisation – Mike Ogden circulated information on the County Council's structure and where Access and Rights of Way, Ranger Service, Railway Paths and Country Parks and the Ecologists sit within the new structure. It was agreed that at the appropriate time that a member of staff of the Planning Service should be invited to attend a Forum meeting to discuss the Local Development Framework and Housing Growth Points.

ACTION: Mike Ogden to advise on appropriate timing

Recruitment to the Forum – A local land agent had expressed an interest in joining the Forum. Information on the role of the Local Access Forum and that the Authority was seeking new applicants has been included in a press release on the ROWIP. The nomination process for Local Authority Members has not yet been concluded and it is not clear whether Councillor Andy Turner would be appointed as the representative.

3. Feedback from Site Visit

Members of the Forum indicated that they were impressed by the work undertaken to redevelop Hardwick Park. The Forum noted that there maybe funding issues for future maintenance of the site.

Jim Welch explained that it would be helpful if information on the site accessibility was available before visiting. Andy Niven said that comprehensive information for visitors has been prepared and will eventually be included on the Council's website. The need for further information on how to link in with the wider rights of way network was also raised.

In response to the concerns raised by the local community, Andy Niven advised that it is intended to undertake an advertising campaign prior to the opening of the new facilities. The Education Officer had recently started work and part of their remit is to encourage local community involvement in the Park.

The Chairman thanked Andy Niven and Kate Phillips for the site visit and the use of the visitor centre.

4. Update from Natural England

The Forum noted an update provided by Kevin Vigars of Natural England (for copy see file of Minutes). Since the update was provided the Forum had been informed that Amanda Earnshaw has been appointed as the National Local Access Forum Liaison Officer for Natural England.

5. Rights of Way Improvement Plan

(a) Award – The Forum were informed that the Chair, Victoria Lloyd and Councillor Ossie Johnson had attended Natural England's ROWIP Awards Day which was held in Leicester on Thursday 19th March 2009. The County Durham ROWIP received an award for best contribution to local prosperity and quality of life.

It was suggested that it might be helpful for the Forum to informally meet with appropriate County Council staff and it was agreed that this would be examined.

ACTION: Mike Ogden to advise

(b) Active Durham 2010 – Victoria Lloyd provided an update on progress. County Durham Sport has secured the funding for the project from the Primary Care Trust (PCT) and is currently working on an outcomes process with the PCT which needs to be completed by end of June. This will involve a workshop with key health stakeholders and will take place in early May before the consultation is rolled out to the Active Durham Steering Group. It is expected that County Durham Sport will be ready to start commissioning projects by October. A triathlon for local community competitors will be held in Seaham on 5th June. Victoria confirmed that there will be bids for projects which link into the implementation of the ROWIP. It was agreed that the LAF maintain an active interest in the programme as it develops via the Chairman.

(c) Regional Evaluation – Reported under Natural England Update

(d) Pilot Area Studies – No progress to report at the present time. The Forum requested that this issue be raised with Natural England.

ACTION: Victoria Lloyd to pursue.

(e) Housing Growth Points – Victoria Lloyd informed the Forum that this was an opportunity to be involved at a planning/development stage and to comment on green infrastructure, access and links. A bid has been submitted for the rights of way network concentrating on the south and east of the County which are the designated growth areas.

(f) Easington Equestrian Study – Victoria Lloyd informed the Forum that Natural England are interested in the study and there may be an opportunity to link this with other projects such as Limestone Landscapes and work of the Heritage Coast. The next step is to organise a mapping event to obtain further information from local equestrians. Marilyn Gibson advised the Forum that the British Horse Society is drawing up a code of conduct for local riders.

(g) Cycling - Victoria Lloyd informed the Forum that a new cycling strategy is being drafted which will run up to 2011 and the implementation of LTP3. A bid is being prepared for a cycling audit of the County. Work is also being carried out on a procedure for inspection and maintenance. The Chairman stressed the need for integration with neighbouring authorities. Alan Dougherty pointed that out there is great potential for off road cycling using some of the moor land access tracks if this can be negotiated with landowners.

(h) Action Plan – Update – Victoria Lloyd circulated an update of ROWIP actions for 2008/09. An action plan for 2009/10 needs to be prepared. Members were invited to express an interest in specific areas of work when invited to do so by Victoria Lloyd.

ACTION: Victoria Lloyd to pursue

6. Cattle Grids and Public Paths

The Forum considered a briefing note (for copy see file) prepared by Audrey Christie about cattle grids on public paths seeking the Forum's guidance.

A discussion took place. Members gave their thoughts on the relative merits of stiles, gates and cattle grids and views were put forward about which structures were preferable. It was noted in particular that some dogs (including guide dogs) have problems with stiles.

It was felt that one size does not fit all. Views were expressed that the countryside cannot be completely accessible and perhaps we might have to live with the situation as it is.

7. National and Regional Issues

The Forum noted the regional workshop report, the notes of the regional meeting held on 18 March and the minutes of the England Access Forum held on 11 March (for copies see file).

Steve Scoffin pointed out that payments to landowners are available under the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme for creating and enhancing access. Payments are not available under the Entry Level Scheme although payment is available under the Upland Entry Level Scheme. In terms of Green Infrastructure, Steve Scoffin explained that it was important for the LAF to become more involved in the implementation of the Local Development Framework and the Local Area Agreement if it is to influence officers and departments on access issues.

Mike Ogden advised that in relation to the Limestone Landscapes project, consultants have completed a desktop analysis of green infrastructure/green spaces on behalf of Natural England. This information has not been tested on the ground and there maybe a role for the Forum to examine/test key sites and report back. Heritage Lottery funding has been awarded for a project co-

ordinator for the Limestone Landscapes project which could help generate substantial funds for access/rights of way.

8. Annual Report

Victoria Lloyd circulated a draft copy of the Forum's annual report for 2008/09. Any feedback on the report should be forwarded to Victoria by the end of the week. The Chair requested that copies of the final report should be forwarded to the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council with a covering letter.

ACTION:

That a copy of the annual report be forwarded to the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council with a covering letter and with a view to a meeting at an appropriate time.

9. Open Access

Alan Dougherty provided an update on the open access fire restrictions meeting which he had attended on behalf of the Forum. He explained that the County is divided into sectors and there is a fire risk rating for each sector. When the fire risk rating reaches a certain level access can be denied. The meeting was arranged to consider whether the sub areas were realistic and it was felt that this issue was too technical for the meeting. The meeting did not address the rain shadow effect with the western area being much wetter than the east of the County.

Alan explained that none of the activities permitted under open access should give rise to a fire risk and he felt that this was an educational issue. He pointed out that many of the moor land areas are crossed or edged by roads which are likely to give rise to higher levels of risk than activities permitted under open access.

There seemed to be very little evidence of how moor land fires start and research is needed. He also pointed out that when fire restrictions have been in place it has been possible for landowners to carry out controlled burning of the moors.

Following discussion of the issues it was agreed that the Forum should write to Natural England requesting that research is undertaken to provide evidence to justify the use of fire restrictions (and question the logic of restrictions when CROW activities don't increase risk of fires). Steve Scoffin pointed out that in some areas of the country, activities such as camping are permitted but haven't increased the risk of fire as the areas are actively managed.

Mike Ogden reported that work is underway to update the site notices on a number of sites across the North Pennines where access restrictions have recently been revoked or varied.

ACTION

That the Forum writes to Natural England requesting that research is undertaken to provide evidence to justify the use of fire restrictions. Alan Dougherty to draft an appropriate letter on behalf of the Forum.

10. 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.

11. Date, time and venue for the next meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting will be held on Monday 14 September 2009 starting at 6.00 p.m. Members were requested to suggest a venue for the meeting. In the absence of suggestions the meeting will take place at County Hall.

12. Any Other Business

Mike Ogden circulated a list of neighbouring authorities, LAFs and ROWIPs. It was agreed that this be discussed at the next meeting.