



**LOCAL ACCESS
FORUM** County Durham

Annual Report 2015/16

www.durham.gov.uk/laf



LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

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Purpose

County Durham Local Access Forum (LAF) is a statutory body created under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. It is independent of the Authority. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act states that the purpose of the LAF is:-

- To advise Durham County Council and others on the improvement of public access to the land in the County for the purpose of the open-air recreation and enjoyment of the area and other prescribed matters.
- In carrying out its function, the LAF will have due regard to the needs of land management and conservation of the natural beauty of the area.

Goals

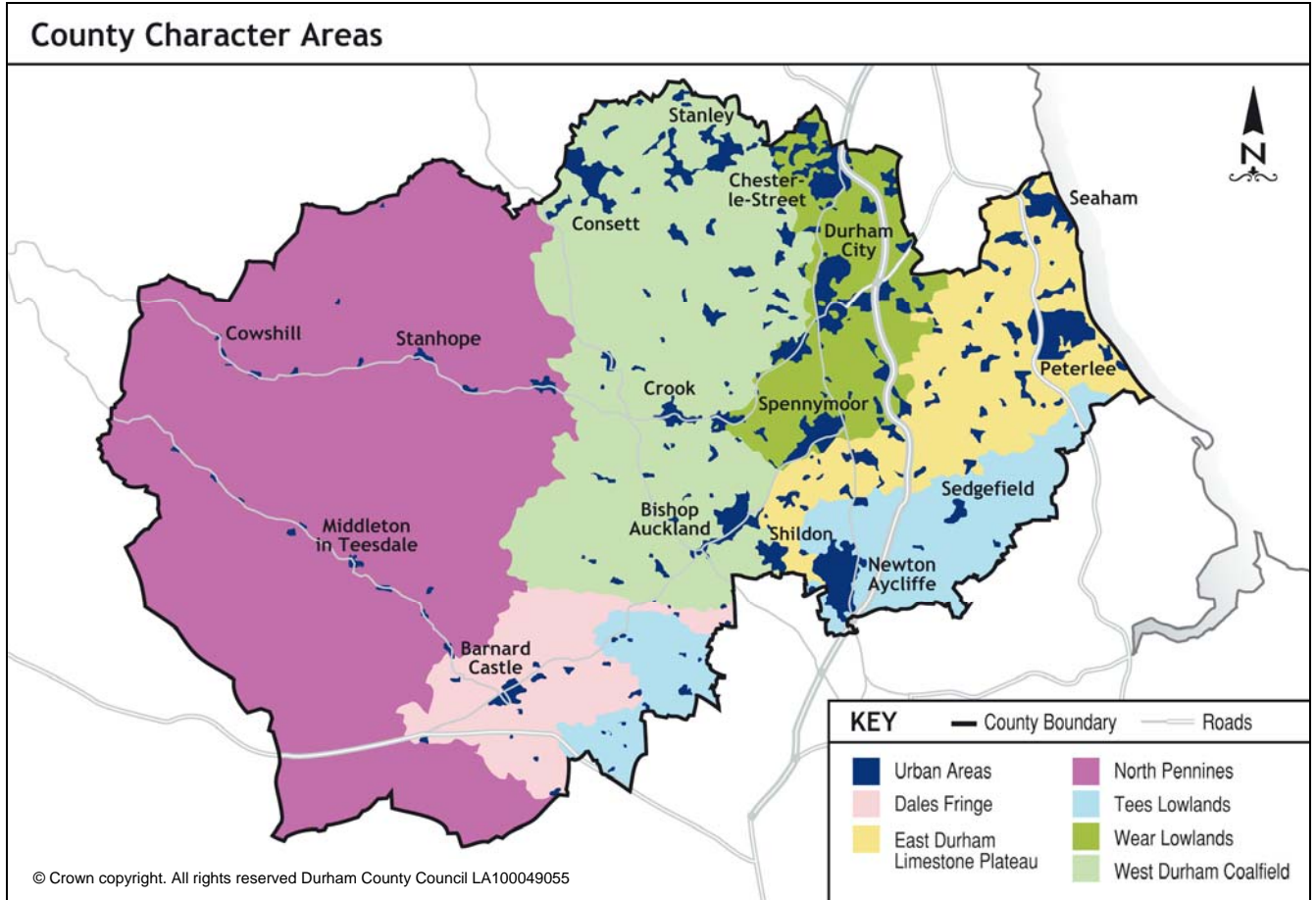
County Durham LAF will champion the improvement and management of access to meet all users' needs, be respectful of land management, promote responsible use and enable participation in healthy outdoor activity. County Durham LAF will work together to objectively advise Durham County Council and others and will make recommendations for the improvement of public access in County Durham.



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Area covered by County Durham Local Access Forum





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Chairman's Foreword

Encouraging people to make more recreational use of the natural environment is a key element of national and local strategies to promote physical activity, improve mental health and combat the growing problem of obesity and related illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, strokes and high blood pressure, all of which are creating an unsustainable burden on health and social care budgets. Greater use of green spaces, cycle ways, bridleways and footpaths can also bring positive economic and environmental benefits by reducing sickness absence, increasing workplace productivity, raising environmental awareness and contributing to sustainable transport solutions.

Yet demands on local authority budgets mean that many councils are struggling to prioritise resources to maintain public spaces and rights of way, let alone improve or extend them, particularly in the wake of last winter's extensive – and expensive – storm damage. This is where local access forums can add value: not only by acting in the capacity of independent adviser and critical friend in their areas but by relieving the pressure on local authority staff and, in partnership with other agencies, exploring opportunities to attract external funding.

In this report you can read how members of County Durham's Local Access Forum, who represent both owner/occupier and user interests and can draw on a wide range of professional experience, are contributing to Durham County Council's vision for an *Altogether Better Durham*: wealthier, healthier, safer, greener, and better for children and young people. By committing their precious time to attend meetings, pursue projects and respond to consultation documents, our members are making a real difference. My thanks also go to council staff for their advice and unwavering support.

All our meetings are open to the public. If you feel you could play a part in improving access in County Durham, or would simply like to learn more about the work of the Forum, think about joining us at one of our meetings. For further details please contact our Secretary, Jill Errington, at laf@durham.gov.uk

Geoff Hughes Chairman



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Members of the Forum

Category

Geoff Hughes - Chairman

Other



Geoff has a broad knowledge of sport and recreation issues. He has recently retired as a leisure, planning and open space consultant. He is Chair of the Board Bright Water Heritage Landscape Partnership, Vice Chair of Northumberland Sport and a Vice Chair of the North East Local Nature Partnership. Geoff is a keen cyclist, walker and fun runner.

Robin Trounson – Vice-Chairman

User

Robin is a retired police officer. He is a keen walker and takes an active interest in facilitating recreational access to local attractions for the elderly and people with disabilities.

David Maughan

Landowner

David is a farmer in south west Durham and represents landowner/occupier interests through his involvement in the National Farmers Union.

Brian Hodgson

Landowner

Brian lives in central Durham and is an experienced landowner and farmer, as well as having been involved in several landowner groups.

Neil Gander

User

Neil is a freelance journalist with a particular interest in mountain-biking, having written a guide to the activity within County Durham, as well as being a keen walker and a former voluntary ranger.

Jim Welch

Other



Jim is involved with a number of organisations representing blind and partially-sighted people, and other disability groups, including being the founder and chairman of Blind Life in Durham.



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Neil Foster

Councillor



Neil is currently the Durham County Council Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Economic Development. This role includes strategic transport, the built environment and tourism. Neil is also a board member of Visit County Durham, the local area tourism partnership. He contributes to the role of ensuring that the work of the Forum is linked in to the wider County strategic role.

Eddie Tomlinson

Councillor



Eddie is currently the Durham County Council Cabinet Member for Assets, Strategic Housing and Rural Issues and this involves being the Council's Rural Champion. He also represents the Council on the Heart of Teesdale Landscape Partnership, the Limestone Landscape Partnership and North Pennines AONB Partnership. He contributes to ensuring that the work of the LAF is linked in to the wider County strategic role.

Tom Bolton

Other

Before early retirement Tom was a local government officer with experience of rights of way and other statutory orders as well as common land and village green issues. As a scrutiny officer he supported projects looking at environmental issues including countryside and coastal access. Currently Clerk to two Parish Councils in County Durham, he is on the Board of Teesdale Action Partnership; and co-opted member of the County Council's Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee.

Geoffrey Rigden

User

Geoff is a semi-retired teacher living in the Beamish area and has been involved in outdoor pursuits for many years both professionally and personally. He was a member of Sedgfield Countryside Group for many years, working to enable and maintain access in that area. He is a regular user of the extensive ROW system in the Derwentside area, and enjoys running, walking and cycling.



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Angela Johnson

User

Angela lives in central Durham and worked as a business analyst. She is an active horse rider and owner, competing in long distance riding for the past 20+ years, and was on the Committee of the Northumberland Durham Group of the Endurance Horse and Pony Society for many years. Angela is a volunteer for the British Horse Society and has been Assistant Access and Bridleways Officer for East Durham since the late 1990s.

Ian Gray

Other

Ian is a voluntary ranger with over thirty years' service in County Durham and is a walks leader for DCC. He is also Vice-Chairman of Environment Committee for Great Aycliffe Town Council.

Ian Gray resigned from the Forum on 22 April 2016

Andrew Jeffrey

Other



Andrew Jeffrey is married and lives in Shotley Bridge. While being a wheelchair user, he's always championed accessibility to the great outdoors. He has had a very varied career pattern through advertising agencies, army, oil drilling in North Sea and Africa (where he broke his back), and some 20 years in broadcasting with the BBC. He is now a writer and wishes his laptop screen was sun-proof. He is looking forward to his role in heading up the DCC LAF presence for the Land of Oak and Iron project. He still loves getting up at 04:00 in the morning in spring to experience black grouse lekking!

Pat Holding

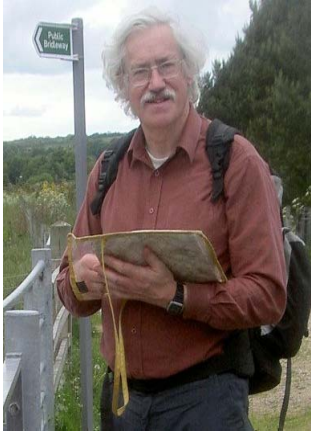
Other

Pat Holding is a recently retired solicitor. She specialised in common land, rights of way, and village green matters together with more general planning, highways and other environmental topics. She now appreciates being able to spend more time walking on County Durham's rights of way but also checking out countryside facilities elsewhere in the UK and Europe.



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Roger Cornwell



User (Now resigned)

Roger represents walkers and is a former Footpaths Officer for the Durham Group of the Ramblers. He chairs both the City of Durham Trust and the Crossgate Community Partnership. His particular interests are in defending and extending the rights of way network in the County, and believes the Access Prioritisation Project is an important way to achieve this in the present economic climate. He has taken the lead getting the County to dedicate some of its land as Access Land under the terms of the CROW Act. He is also the LAF's "Huddle Champion". Huddle is a web-based forum run by DEFRA where staff from DEFRA and Natural England, and LAF members across the country, can exchange views and information.

Roger retired from the LAF at its AGM in July 2015.

Definition of Member Interests:-

Users

Users of local rights of way or open access land (eg walkers, horse riders, cyclists and carriage drivers)

Landowners

Owners and occupiers of access land or land over which local rights of way subsist

Other

Any other interests relevant to the appointing authority's area.



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Dates of Meetings 2015/16

The Forum met on the following dates:

- 20 April 2015
- 6 July 2015
- 5 October 2015
- 18 January 2016

Business of the Forum

Coordinate LAF Activity

The Local Access Forum meets as a full body 4 times a year. Meetings are occasionally preceded by a site visit to examine particular issues of concern to the LAF. Other meetings are preceded by training events organised by members of the Forum or by inviting external facilitators. A visit was held at Kitty's Wood, Roddymoor to explore footpath improvements. Training sessions were held on Access to Commons led by Tom Bolton and on Rights of Way led by the Senior Rights of Way Officer Audrey Christie.

Sub groups of the LAF coordinate our input into specific topics and individual LAF members represent us on a number of external bodies including the North East Local Nature Partnership and the North Pennines AONB Partnership.

The Chair and Vice Chair meet with officers of the County Council to prepare agendas 2 weeks in advance of our regular meetings to ensure the agenda reflects those issues that require our input.

Meetings are generally well attended with in excess of 75% of members present.

Geoff Hughes

County Durham Plan

The LAF has provided comments at each of the consultations stages of this statutory Local Plan to ensure access issues are fully considered. Officers of the Council advised that the plan was withdrawn mid-2015 and information on the way forward is awaited.

Geoff Hughes



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Green Infrastructure Strategy

The GIS was developed as a supporting document to the preparation of the County Durham Plan. There were no developments during the course of the year.

Geoff Hughes

Three Rivers Local Nature Partnership

The LNP is a statutory body comprising public, private and voluntary sector organisations whose remit is to co-ordinate environmental interests across County Durham and Tyne and Wear. Via the Chair the LAF has been instrumental in its establishment and the merger during the course of the year with Northumberland to form the North East Local Nature Partnership. The LAF Chairman sits on the Executive Committee of the LNP acting as Vice Chair to that body. A key achievement of the LNP has been to achieve Stage 1 funding for a Heritage Lottery Fund bid for Bright Water (discussed below).

Geoff Hughes

Bright Water Landscape Partnership

Under the auspices of the LNP a stage one bid was approved in November for Bright Water, a Heritage Landscape Partnership for the River Skerne catchment. If successful in achieving approval for stage 2 there is the opportunity to secure in excess of £3m of funding for the creation of wetlands and habitats and access improvements to this part of County Durham and Darlington. The Chairman of the LAF was heavily involved in the preparation of the stage one bid and now Chairs the Board of the Partnership developing stage 2 which is due to be submitted in July 2017.

Geoff Hughes

Dedication of Land

It has been a long standing concern of the LAF to encourage landowners to dedicate land under the terms of the 2000 Countryside Act for Open Access. Following the County Council's dedication of land at Waldrige Fell discussions are ongoing with the County to identify other areas of land that may benefit from such an approach. These discussions are ongoing.

Geoff Hughes



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Regional LAF Liaison

The County Durham LAF plays an active role in seeking to ensure a joined up approach to access with other LAF's in the North East. The Chair and Vice Chair are invited by Natural England to meet at their offices twice a year to explore issues of mutual interest. Consideration is being given to identifying key access priorities across the region and a brief is under consideration to explore commissioning a consultant to undertake his work.

The meeting which took place in November 2015 explored a region wide problem of Rights of Way which cross railway lines and solutions were explored with Network Rail.

Geoff Hughes

Government Consultations

From time to time Government consults LAF's on various environmental or access matters. The Chairman co-operates with individual members to co-ordinate such responses. Government consultations responded to during the year included a New Strategy for Sport.

Geoff Hughes

Completion of Annual Report and Pro-forma

It is a requirement of the legislation under which LAFs were created that a report on performance is prepared in the form of an annual report. In order to ensure a consistent approach to reporting Natural England also require LAF's to complete a pro-forma setting out activity in particular categories. Members contribute to both of these exercises to ensure appropriate information is submitted.

Geoff Hughes

North Pennines AONB Access and Recreation Working Group

A representative of the LAF attends quarterly meetings of the North Pennines AONB Access and Recreation Working Group. Membership from the North Pennine AONB Partnership, Northumbria, Cumbria and Durham local authorities, the three LAFs, the National Trust, Natural England, Pennine National Trails Partnership, Northumbria National Park Authority and Penrith Ramblers, reflects the broad multi-agency, cross-border approach to conserving and enhancing this Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, helping people to enjoy and understand it, and supporting rural development. The most significant development over the last year has been official recognition of the North Pennines by UNESCO as a



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Global Geopark. Discussions continue to resolve cross-border anomalies (e.g. at Birkdale in Teesdale, where the Green Trod on the south side of the Maize Beck does not currently link with the Pennine Way on the northern side) and problems between local estate owners and users of the Coast to Coast cycle route on Stanhope Common on closure days. To ensure an appropriate balance is maintained between access/recreation and conservation, work is also being undertaken to develop a 'Mass Participation Outdoor Recreation Event' Code of Practice. Electric bikes can be hired for touring the area from Chatterbox Café in St. John's Chapel, the Old Village Store at Edmundbyers and Blanchland Post Office.

Robin Trounson

Pennine National Trails Northern Working Group

A representative of the LAF attends quarterly meetings of the multi-agency Pennine National Trails Northern Working Group. Membership from the North Pennine AONB Partnership, Northumbria, Cumbria and Durham local authorities, the three LAFs, the National Trust, Natural England, Pennine National Trails Partnership, Northumbria National Park Authority and Penrith Ramblers, reflects the broad multi-agency, cross-border approach to managing the Pennine Way and Pennine Bridleway. An important development over the last year has been the appointment of a National Trails Partnership Manager whose responsibilities include surveying and identifying budget priorities for both trails and rationalising arrangements for maintenance. The 50th anniversary of the Pennine Way proved a popular theme for County Durham's 2015 Walking Festival and work is ongoing to promote opportunities for more volunteers to become involved in managing and maintaining the national trails. Members of the public can help support access to the North Pennines through the 'Donate a Gate' scheme, details of which can be found at www.friendsofthenorthpennines.org.uk

Robin Trounson

MENE Champion

Funded by Natural England with support from Defra and the Forestry Commission, the MENE (Monitoring Engagement with the Natural Environment) survey collects data about visits by adults to the great outdoors and what they do when they get there. Since 2009 about 800 people have been interviewed every week (some 45,000 a year) to ascertain what type of outdoor destination (if any) they have visited in the last seven days, how far they travelled to get there, their mode of transport, the duration of their visit, the activities they engaged in, what



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motivated them, the amount of money they spent, and any barriers to making such visits. While surveys consistently show that poverty, disability and ethnicity are common barriers to people making such visits, the data is of little practical use in its raw form. Analysed and translated into meaningful information, however, it can provide local authorities and other agencies with empirical evidence to assist with planning and funding decisions. During the last year the LAF has been keeping an eye on a project in the South Pennines that is using MENE data to achieve a better understanding of the demographics of visitors to the area with a view to boosting the local economy by increasing visitor numbers. Meanwhile the LAF continues to promote local awareness of the existence of survey data, arguing that understanding the barriers to people making recreational visits to the countryside for health and recreation is an important first step towards designing remedial initiatives.

Robin Trounson

Working with Public Health

The LAF's links with local public health groups reflect the importance of the natural environment, outdoor recreation and physical activity in combating obesity, mental ill-health and illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, strokes and high blood pressure. Having supported the launch of County Durham's Strategic Framework for Healthy Weight in May 2015, the LAF has now consolidated its role in the local public health agenda by becoming a formal member of the County Durham Healthy Weight Alliance. In the last year we have also participated in the County Durham Health and Well-Being Board's consultation over a draft Physical Activity Framework (Altogether Active) and submitted written feedback. With our particular interest in improving public access to local land for exercise, recreation and enjoyment, our representatives are able to offer advice on a wide range of interests and activities. Much of the work remains in the developmental stage and the LAF holds that the key to achieving successful public health outcomes lies in identifying inactive and under-active groups, understanding the barriers they face and supporting them to overcome impediments and embrace a more active lifestyle.

Jim Welch

Access Prioritisation

Representatives of the LAF had a consultative role in the Access Prioritisation project designed by Durham County Council to help fulfil its obligation under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 to maintain a rights of way improvement plan. While promoting the health, social and economic importance of improving opportunities for people to enjoy fresh air and exercise, the new



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Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP3) launched in November 2015 acknowledges the difficult financial challenges the Council faces in maintaining and extending public access to the countryside. The Access Prioritisation scheme was created to assist decision-making by identifying paths with the greatest potential for improvement in specific areas. The LAF continues to operate in an advisory role, supporting officers to secure funding and develop greater access for people with disabilities.

Jim Welch

Rights of Way Improvement Plan

The ROWIP is a key area of work for the LAF and the LAF sub-group assigned to the ROWIP work closely with the local authority. The LAF ROWIP sub-group were involved at an early stage in the review of the previous strategy and in the scope and development of the Council's third ROWIP 2015-2018 *walk, cycle, ride*. Throughout the year the sub-group met with DCC's Sustainable Travel Officer and responded to consultations on early drafts and the final draft which went out to public consultation. The ROWIP was published in October 2015. The LAF will continue to monitor progress on implementation through updates provided at their meetings.

Geoff Rigden

Common Land and Village Greens

During the course of the year discussions were held with the County Council about clarifying the role and responsibilities of respective Service areas within the Council; links from the Council's commons and village greens web-pages to other information; and reviewing the ownership of greens and commons. The LAF was also represented at a national conference in 2015 held in Newcastle upon Tyne about the registration new areas of common land. During the year an application for deregistration of a small area of common land was received by the County Council to which the LAF responded as a consultee. The land was subsequently deregistered.

Tom Bolton

Heritage Coast Management Plan

Comments were provided early in 2015 on the draft Heritage Coast Management Plan, supplied by Niall Benson of the Coast Management Team. The Plan is still in draft form and due to be submitted for wider consultation during 2016. Once the Plan is finalised further ongoing assistance will be given to provide



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constructive comment on the development of the heritage coast and its management.

Angela Johnson

Coastal Access

Representations were made with the aim to achieve higher access rights for the coastal footpath in our county. These were not successful; council officials give various reasons for not supporting an upgrade. As parts of the path are already being used by users other than those on foot, attempts to discuss higher rights for the route, if only in part, will continue to be made. The East Durham Equine Study, which was completed recently and assisted with, may contribute to obtaining better access in places in due course. However, this may prove difficult as it is understood any outputs from the study have been shelved for the moment due to financial constraints.

Angela Johnson

Deregulation Act

A watching brief has been kept on the Deregulation Act and will continue to be made and acted upon as appropriate. Following attendance at the Northern LAF Conference at Leeds in March 2016 it was thought it would be advantageous to check how other LAFs are getting involved in securing historic routes before the 2026 cut-off. Checking this out via Huddle, together with a training session for Durham LAF members, are due to be arranged in 2016.

Angela Johnson

Land of Oak and Iron

LAF member Andrew Jeffrey has taken up the role of lead on the Land of Oak and Iron project for the DCC LAF. In doing so, he has also become the lead for the triumvirate of LAFs involved: Tyne & Wear LAF, Northumberland National Park and County Joint LAF and DCC LAF. The composition of the LOI Board and lead team has been completed (April '16).

It will be through this, his knowledge and experience in matters of creating access for both physically and sensorily impaired people will blend with the need to ensure the project delivers on all aspects of developing a strategic approach to access for walking, cycling and riding, incorporating opportunities for people of all abilities. This is a long term project that will run through to 2020.

Andrew Jeffrey



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Contacts

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Forum Website (Contains Minutes of all meetings and Annual Reports):

www.durham.gov.uk/laf

The Forum would like to thank the Officers for their continued support.