



**LOCAL ACCESS  
FORUM** County Durham

# Annual Report 2016/17

[www.durham.gov.uk/laf](http://www.durham.gov.uk/laf)



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

## **Contents**

	Page
<b>1. LAF Purpose and Goals</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Map of area covered by County Durham Local Access Forum</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. Chairman's Foreword</b>	<b>5-6</b>
<b>4. Members of the Forum</b>	<b>7-10</b>
<b>5. Dates of Meetings</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>6. Business of the Forum</b>	<b>11-18</b>
<b>7. Contacts</b>	<b>19</b>



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

## 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.

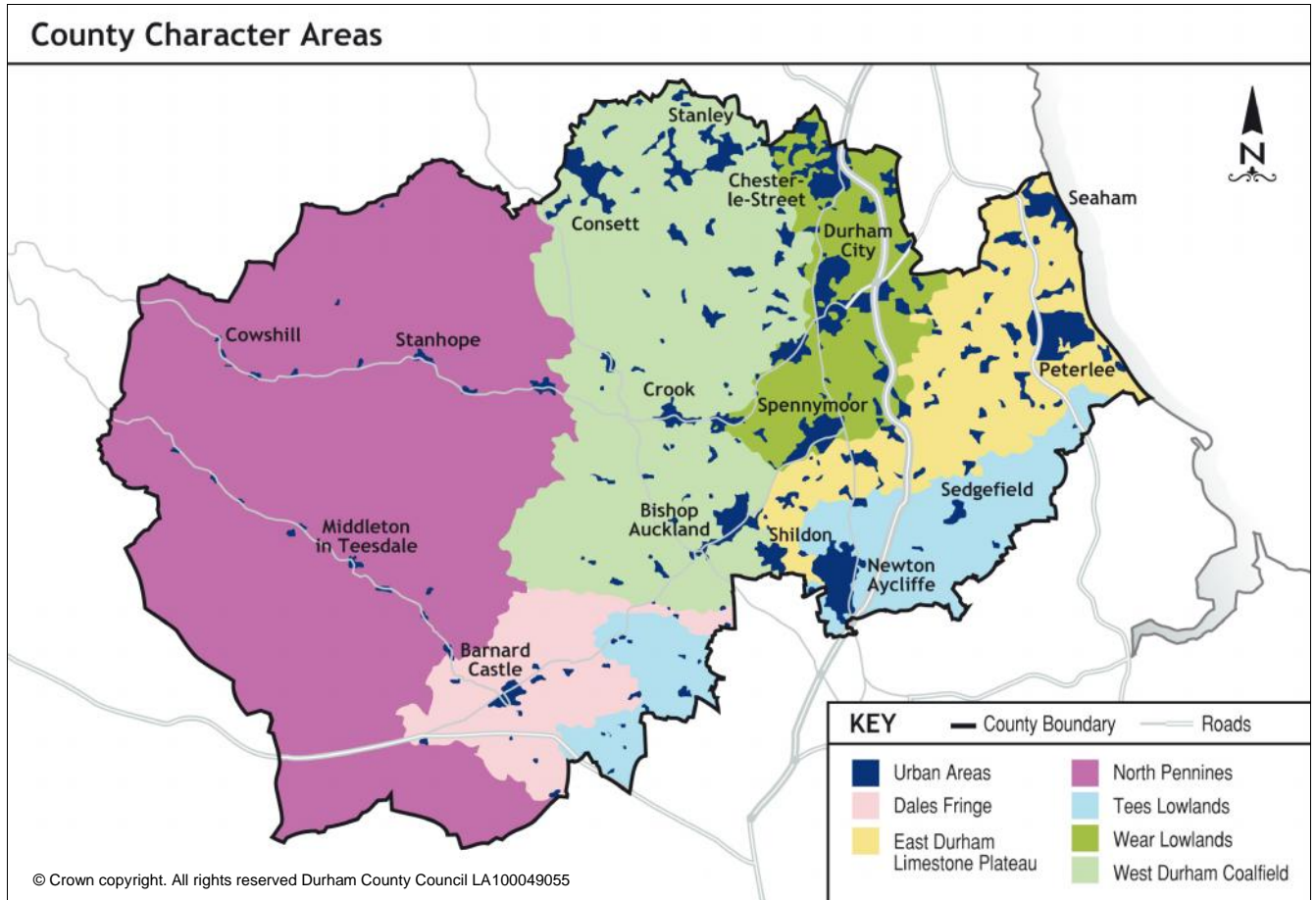
## Goals

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.



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

## Area covered by County Durham Local Access Forum





# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

## Chairman's Foreword

Threats to people's access to the natural environment feature all too often in news reports: not just high profile stories like Heathrow and HS2 but proposals for new housing and highways on Green Belt land, declining air quality, cutbacks to National Parks funding and rural transport, and continuing constraints on local authority spending for public parks and rights of way – all of which threaten to undermine people's enjoyment of the countryside and urban green spaces. The clock is also ticking for registering 'Lost Ways' (i.e. historic rights of way that are not recorded on modern maps) before the statutory cut-off date in 2026. Meanwhile obesity and related illnesses such as diabetes, strokes, cancer, heart disease, depression and high blood pressure have reached epidemic proportions – and to relieve their burden on the National Health Service we are urged to make more recreational use of the natural environment to improve our physical health and mental well-being.

But here in the North East the launch of an Investors in the Environment (iE) Strategy by our Local Nature Partnership (LNP) in February 2017 gives cause for optimism. The LNP is a statutory body comprising public, private and voluntary sector organisations (including the County Durham Local Access Forum) which seeks to co-ordinate environmental interests across Northumberland, Tyne & Wear and County Durham and encourage businesses, landowners, communities and individuals to support its vision of environmental growth summarised in the strapline – '*A thriving natural environment providing for a healthier and wealthier North East of England*'. Local organisations can improve their environmental credentials through the national iE accreditation scheme and a £100m fund has been started – named the Capability Foundation after the Northumberland-born landscape gardener, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown – to improve the North East environment.

Balancing environmental, social and economic interests is central to the work of local access forums (LAFs) in their statutory role of independent adviser to their local authority and other agencies in respect of recreational access to the countryside. Working with public, private and voluntary sector partners, LAFs seek to protect, integrate and enhance public access in local strategies, policies and plans while paying due regard to the needs of land management and environmental conservation. 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, contribute to Durham County Council's vision for an *Altogether Better Durham*: wealthier,



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

healthier, safer, greener, and better for children and young people. By committing their precious time to attending meetings, pursuing research and responding to consultation documents, our members are making a real difference. Appreciation and thanks also go to council officers for their wise counsel and unwavering support.

We meet four times a year. All 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](mailto:laf@durham.gov.uk)

**Geoff Hughes Chairman**



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

## 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.

### Angela Johnson (Vice-Chair)

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.

### David Maughan MBE

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.



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

## **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.

## **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**

Tom is a former local government officer with experience of rights of way and other statutory orders as well as common land and village greens. 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 a co-opted member of the County Council's Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee.





# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

## **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 Sedgefield 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.

## **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 still loves getting up at 04:00 in the morning in spring to experience black grouse lekking! (retired from the LAF in October 2016)

## **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.

## **Steve Scoffin**

**Other**



Steve re-joined the LAF in 2016, having previously been a Member and Vice Chair from its inception to November 2012. He has worked in countryside management since 1978 starting as a Countryside Warden with Durham County Council at Hardwick Hall Country Park, after a short period working for Durham University's Archaeology Department as a Survey Assistant. He has worked throughout England, including as a Secretary of State Appointed Member of the North York Moors National Park Authority, Chair of the Northumberland Coast and Lowlands LEADER Local Action Group, a Trustee of Durham Wildlife Trust and Company Secretary of the Countryside Management Association. He represented the National Park Authority on the North York Moors LAF, and was a Member of the Tees Valley LAF for nine years and



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

Chair for six of these, and was Chair of Natural England's National LAF Conference in 2013. He currently teaches countryside management, business studies, ICT and management of farm livestock as a Lecturer at Askham Bryan College's Tees Valley Centre.

## **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.



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

## Dates of Meetings 2016/17

The Forum met on the following dates:

- ) 18 April 2016
- ) 11 July 2016
- ) 10 October 2016
- ) 30 January 2017

## Business of the Forum

### Annual Report

The publication of an annual report is a statutory requirement. LAF members are responsible for reporting on their own programmes of work. We also complete an annual review for Natural England to give them a national picture of activities, achievements, challenges and priorities.

### Co-ordinate LAF Activity

The Local Access Forum meets as a full body 4 times a year. Meetings are occasionally preceded by presentations and discussion to examine particular issues of concern to the LAF. In the last year these sessions included an examination of the County Council's Green Infrastructure Strategy, a presentation from Visit County Durham and the final draft of the Heritage Coast Management Plan.

The effective progress in the work of the LAF is achieved via a series of sub groups which progress specific issues between the quarterly meetings. Members represent us on a number of external bodies including the North East Nature Partnership and the North Pennines AONB Partnership and the Bright Water Landscape Partnership Board.

The Chair and Vice Chairs 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.

### Regional LAF Liaison

The Chair met with representatives from the other LAF's in the region at Tyne Rowing Club on 6 July 2016 to discuss matters of common interest in the region.



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

Tees Valley LAF is being more closely associated with that region but in Durham, Tyne and Wear and Northumberland discussions have focused on influencing the combined authority and seeking to establish access priorities for the region to inform the wider debate about devolution. Regional meetings offer the opportunity to co-ordinate input to the Land of Oak and Iron and the North East Local Nature Partnership.

## **Consultations**

During the year the LAF responded to the following consultations:-

Durham City Sustainable Transport Strategy and Action Plan 2015-2030  
Final Draft Heritage Coast Management Plan.  
Draft Durham City Neighbourhood Plan.  
Rural Tourism Government Committee Inquiry – supporting rural growth and improving access.

## **North East Nature Partnership**

The LAF has close links with the North East Nature Partnership with the Chair of the LAF serving as Vice Chair (south) of that body. The Partnership is a high level group with senior level representation from statutory bodies, the private sector and voluntary organisations. The involvement of the LAF is focused on the long term stewardship and promotion of the region's natural environment to foster health and well-being.

## **Bright Water Landscape Partnership**

The Chair of the LAF also acts as the Chair of the Bright Water Landscape Partnership and the success of the project to date has been due in a large part to the efforts of the LAF to secure funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Partnership incorporates 200sq km either side of the A1 in the South of County Durham, and follows the course of the River Skerne through central Darlington. The project which puts heritage conservation at the heart of rural regeneration in that area has successfully achieved stage one funding and a bid is close to completion which aims to secure £3m towards environmental and access improvements in that area.



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

## **Durham County Council Liaison**

Representatives of the LAF meet bi-annually with Durham County Council's Head of Planning and Assets to discuss matters of common interest. Over the last year these liaison meetings have enabled us to begin exploring opportunities to dedicate County Council land for open access in line with the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, and to clarify recording and enforcement arrangements in respect of common land and village greens.

## **County Durham Plan**

The County Durham Plan will set the policy framework for development in the County until 2033 in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework which requires all local authorities to produce a plan for economic and housing growth. In feedback provided at each stage of consultation, most recently during the Issues and Options stage in June 2016, the LAF has asserted the importance of preserving access to Green Belt land for public health and well-being while acknowledging opportunities for further mineral exploitation in the Pennines without jeopardising the unique character of the area. The timetable for the next stage of the plan has been deferred pending assimilation of the Government's White Paper on Housing published in January 2017. In the meantime the LAF has accepted an invitation from the County Council's Head of Planning and Assets to participate in a workshop to ensure that consideration is given to issues of access in future drafts.

## **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 Pennines AONB Partnership, Northumberland, Cumbria and Durham County Councils, Scottish Borders Council, the three LAFs, the National Trust, Natural England, Pennine National Trails Partnership, Northumberland National Park Authority and Penrith Ramblers, reflects the broad multi-agency, cross-border approach to managing the Pennine Way and Pennine Bridleway. Work is ongoing with the North Pennines AONB Partnership 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](http://www.friendsofthenorthpennines.org.uk)



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

## **Working with Public Health**

The LAF's links with public health reflect the importance of the natural environment to mental well-being and for combating obesity and related illnesses such as diabetes, strokes, cancer, heart disease, depression and high blood pressure. Having supported the launch of County Durham's Strategic Framework for Healthy Weight in 2015, the LAF has consolidated its role in the local health agenda by becoming a formal member of the County Durham Healthy Weight Alliance. With our particular interest in improving public access to local land for recreation and exercise, our representatives are able to offer advice on a wide range of interests and activities. The LAF supports 'a whole systems approach' in which obesity reduction is integrated with planning and holds that the key to achieving successful outcomes lies in identifying inactive and under-active groups, understanding the barriers they face and helping them to overcome impediments and embrace more active lifestyles.

## **Land of Oak and Iron**

Land of Oak and Iron (LOI) is a project based in the Derwent Valley to restore rare industrial relics, conserve waterways, meadows and woodland, and improve public access, awareness and understanding of the area's distinctive heritage. Access improvements are focused on repairing and upgrading to bridleway standard the poorest sections of some of the many old colliery railway lines and waggonways that criss-cross the valley in order to open up the area to many more people. Interpretation and promotional initiatives will complete improvements, including a new Visitor Centre at Winlaton Mill. The project extends over three local authority areas and the County Durham LAF has joined forces with the Northumberland and Tyne & Wear LAFs to nominate a single representative to monitor and support access developments. This is achieved by holding regular meetings with the LOI Access and Woodland Officer. Work started in 2016 and is scheduled for completion by the middle of 2018. Meanwhile there are plans for an outdoors activities festival in the second half of 2017 to celebrate and trial achievements to date.

## **Heritage Coast Management Plan**

Another version of the Heritage Coast Management Plan was supplied by Niall Benson of the Coast Management Team in 2016. Detailed comments were made on this version of the Plan in December as part of this latest consultation exercise. The final plan is due to go to the Heritage Coast Steering Group in July 2017 for approval. A formal response to the LAF comments is due to be received by the end of May and Niall has offered to provide another presentation on the



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

Plan following on from his briefing given in October 2016. When the Plan is finalised ongoing assistance will be given to provide constructive comment on the development and management of the heritage coast.

## **Coastal Access**

The issue of higher access rights for the coastal footpath continue to be raised, but to date little progress has been made. Alternative routes near the coast are still to come to fruition due to financial constraints. Representation on coastal access partnerships will be taken up when the invitation for these events commence. It is anticipated these will be implemented after the final version of the Coastal Management Plan is published.

## **De-Regulation Act**

A watching brief has been maintained on the Deregulation Act but little movement has been seen on this due to other factors taking Government time. With the lack of recent progress it is now anticipated that the Act will not come into effect before April 2018. The Rights of Way Team will provide updates to the LAF as and when information on implementation emerges.

## **Lost Ways**

Following the LAF Conference in March 2016, it was arranged for Sue Rogers of the British Horse Society and Northumberland LAF to give a presentation to LAF members on research being carried out by volunteers to identify 'lost ways' and the process of having them recorded by the 2026 cut-off date.

After this a sub-group of the Durham LAF was set-up to explore lost routes. Sue provided a list of 20 potential routes to investigate in County Durham to some of the sub-group, and following this four members of the LAF went to 'Restoring The Record' training events run by the British Horse Society and The Ramblers, with the aim of enabling and empowering volunteers to make definitive map modification orders for any routes that would be extinguished in 2026. Some of the sub-group visited the Rights of Way office to be shown the Council's GIS mapping tools and how to use them.

This was to look at further potential routes for investigation - 35 RUPPs (Roads Used as Public Paths) had been re-designated as footpaths in 1972. From the historical maps and aerial views on these we were able to make an initial assessment whether they were worth investigating further with a view to trying to make a bridleway claim. The list of those thought to have merit to be researched



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

for gaining higher access rights is to be shared with the sub-group, and a meeting of the group to be arranged in the Autumn 2017 so that members can share investigation information, good practices and progress to date.



## **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. Good progress is being made in these areas. The LAF continues to be a consultee by the County Council on applications for deregistration of common land.





# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

## **River Tees Rediscovered Project (RTR)**

The River Tees Rediscovered project involved the local LAFs, including County Durham, to assist in developing a website on the whole length of the Teesdale Way which would hopefully prove useful to visitors and users of the route. Unfortunately due to personnel changes within the RTR the development has been delayed, but it is hoped that it will be furthered in the coming year.

## **Heart of Teesdale Landscape Partnership**

The Heart of Teesdale five year project, sponsored with Heritage Lottery Funding, concluded earlier in the year. It has been widely recognised as achieving much in its period and leaves behind a legacy of improvements that shall stretch many years into the future. A feature of the project was the involvement of numerous individuals and groups, on a voluntary basis, over a wide range projects.

## **Hedgecutting – Press Release**

A press statement was issued last August, aimed at farmers and hedge cutting contractors just ahead of the main hedge cutting season. It encouraged the use of warning signs to advise cyclists of puncture risks ahead on vulnerable sections of road. The article was picked up by a number of local newspapers and hopefully had some influence.

## **Joint LAF Site Visit**

In July last year a joint visit with the Tyne and Wear LAF took place to the area surrounding the Lambton Estate to look at the impact of the housing schemes in the area would have on access to the various Rights of Way in the area. In general it seemed that the effect would be minimal but the scheme might open up the possibility of limited further access.

At the same time the state of the local paths was assessed, in particular a section of the Weardale Way. After the visit problems that had been noted were addressed and the access to the path is much improved.

## **Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP)**

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



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM *County Durham*

scope and development of the Council's third ROWIP 2015-2018 Walk, Cycle, Ride. The ROWIP was published in October 2015. The LAF will continue to monitor progress on implementation through updates provided at their meetings.

## **Cycling**

County Durham LAF continues to work with the County's Cycling Officer to raise the standards of cycling provision in County Durham. The LAF has been able to advise on the content of the revised Cycling Strategy and on the Durham City Sustainable Transport Strategy. Bicycle users will also benefit from any additions to the Rights of Way network resulting from the Lost Ways project and the LAF continues to press the Rights of Way team to identify opportunities for new and improved off-road access for mountain bikers. Work is already underway on the new Joint North East Local Authorities Cycling and Walking Strategy and Durham LAF was represented at a meeting in Gateshead which set out to establish a framework for this.



# LOCAL ACCESS FORUM County Durham

## Contacts

### **Secretary**

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### **Access and Rights of Way Team Officers**

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### **Travel Planning Team Officers**

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

**[www.durham.gov.uk/laf](http://www.durham.gov.uk/laf)**

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