



**LOCAL ACCESS
FORUM** County Durham

Annual Report 2017/18

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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.

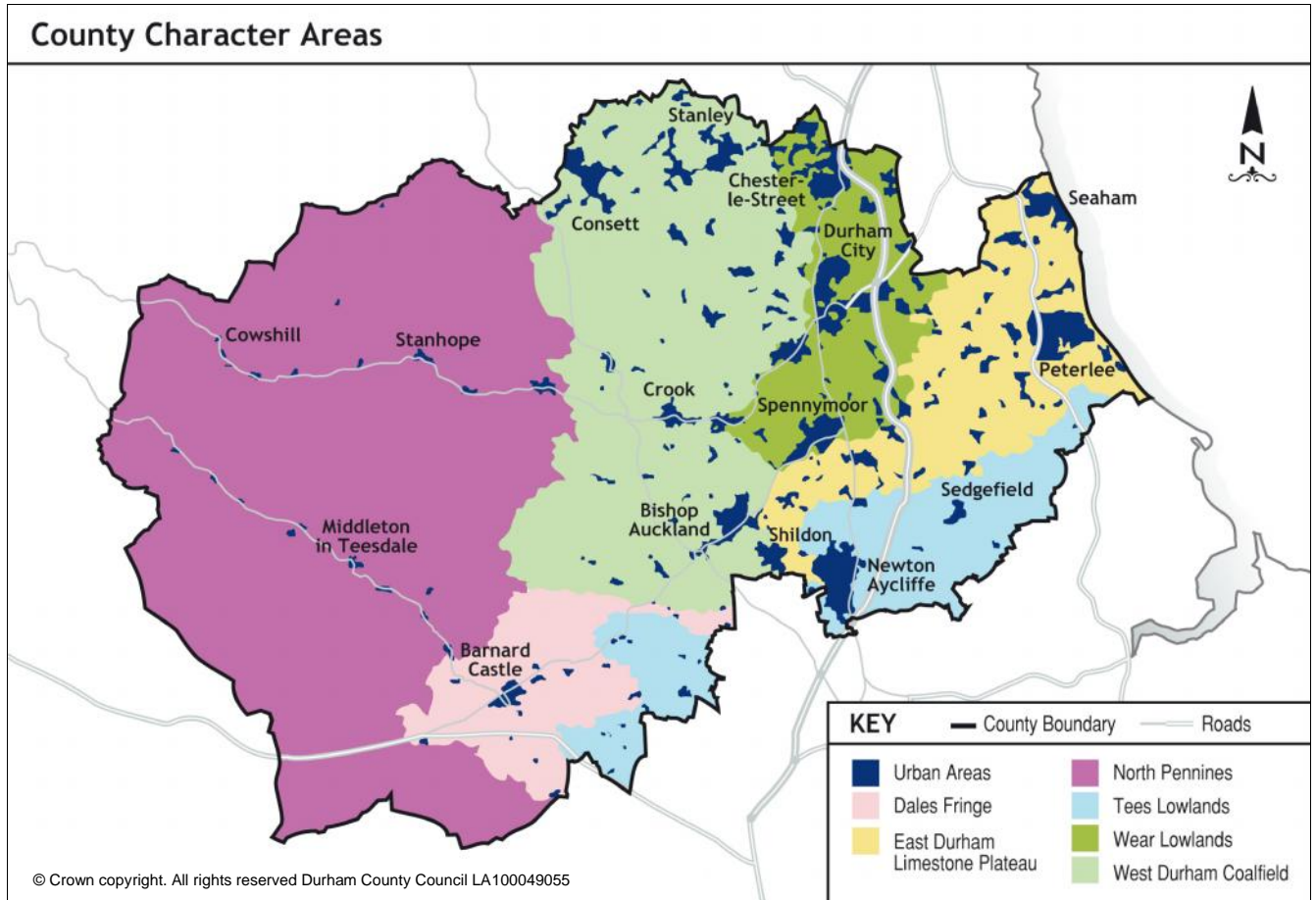
Goals

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

The Government has provided a boost to encouraging more recreational use of the natural environment in its recent 25 year plan to improve the Environment. The plan outlines the government's proposals "to leave our environment in a better state than we found it". The Government is committed to building many more homes, but there will be a requirement that new development should result in environmental gain. It is stated in the plan that there should be high quality accessible natural spaces close to where people live and work, particularly in urban areas. The public will be encouraged to spend more time in these spaces to benefit their health and wellbeing.

It is emphasised in the paper that there will be a focus on increasing action to improve the Environment from all sectors of society, and farmers will be included in this. Enhancing woodland is mentioned as a particular aim. In relation to development (and therefore particularly for new builds) there will be a high environmental standard encouraging walking and cycling. Local Authorities will be working with developers to achieve this net environmental gain and it is anticipated that other organisations will make some contribution. In particular Local Access Forums with such relevant knowledge could provide a valuable contribution in this process.

The land dedication proposal on which LAF is working does tie in well with the above mentioned Government initiative. At this time this Council is not comfortable with dedicating land for public access, and it is therefore a matter where this group will need to continue persuading the authority that there are benefits in doing so. I am nevertheless very pleased that this authority is very supportive of making Council land available for permissive use by the public. A small number of sites across the County have been identified by the Council for such use, which should be available to the public in the not too distant future if suitable. It is particularly pleasing that the Council is also prepared to make further sites available in the future.

Good progress is being made on identifying lost ways. Researching lost routes is a very time consuming exercise, but one member of the LAF has dedicated considerable effort to preparing modification submissions to the Council and is to be commended for his dedication. His applications, together with those submitted by British Horse Society volunteers, are going to require resources to assess them, and the impact and situation regarding suitable resource will have to be monitored.



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The new draft County Plan has just been released, which will involve members of the group in evaluation and providing a response. This will be an opportunity to ensure appropriate provision of recreational access facilities and improvements in the Environment.

Next year is going to be another busy year for the group with all these new plans and initiatives. Hopefully it will bring about further improvements in the Environment. I have only mentioned some of the areas in which the group has been involved this year, but there are many others where there has been some important work going on. I would like to highlight the dedication which individual members have shown in respect of their specific areas of interest within the group, and to express my gratitude and admiration for everyone's commitment. My gratitude and thanks also extend to the officers of the County Council who are always so very helpful and willing.

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

Pat Holding
Chair



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Members of the Forum

Category

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.

Geoff Hughes

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.

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.



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Jim Welch



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.

Other

Tom Bolton

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.

Other

Geoffrey Rigden

Geoff is a 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.

User

Pat Holding

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.

User

Steve Scoffin



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

Other



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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 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.

Peter Singer

Other

Peter is retired and has lived in Barnard Castle for the last twenty years. He is a keen walker, with an interest in local wildlife and conservation. Peter is a volunteer with Moor House-Upper Teesdale National Nature Reserve and Trees For Teesdale and is a Pennine Way Champion. He is also secretary of Barnard Castle Walkers Are Welcome, which seeks to promote the town as a vibrant walking centre to attract walking tourists and monitors the maintenance of local footpaths. He has recently written a guided walk leaflet exploring the "yards" of Barnard Castle.

Colin Hemingway
(now resigned)

Other

John Sturdy

Other

John is a retired Police Officer and former Civil Servant with the MOD (Defence Business Services). Currently a Voluntary Ranger with Northumbria National Park and formerly in the same capacity with the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Currently a Walk Leader in Northumberland National Park and his interests are all aspects of flora and fauna and in particular tree and wild flower identification.



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Carl Marshall

Councillor



Carl is currently the Durham County Council Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration. This role includes strategic transport, the County Durham Plan and regeneration. Carl also represents the Council on the North East Combined Authority. He contributes to the role of ensuring that the work of the Forum is linked to the wider County Strategic Role.

Ossie Johnson

Councillor



Ossie is currently the Durham County Council Cabinet Member for Tourism, Culture, Leisure and Rural Issues and this involves being the council's Rural Champion. He also represents the Council on the north Pennines AONB Partnership. He contributes to ensuring that the work of the LAF is linked in to the wider County Strategic role.



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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.

Dates of Meetings 2017/18

The Forum met on the following dates:

-) 24 April 2017
-) 17 July 2017
-) 9 October 2017
-) 22 January 2018



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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.

Presentations

The Forum received presentations on:-

Durham County Council's Green Infrastructure Strategy
Physical Activity Framework
Hartlepool Borough Council's Project Traffic Lights for Dogs

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 explore opportunities to open up County Council land for public access in support of the public health agenda, review the resource implications of managing the registration of unrecorded historic rights of way, and to agree training for LAF members in local planning procedures.

Regional LAF Liaison

The chair and/or vice-chairs of the County Durham LAF hold regular meetings with their counterparts in other North East LAFs to ensure a joined-up approach to issues of public access in the region. Over the last year the group has been working to foster a closer working relationship with the North East Combined Authority (NECA) in relation to regional transport plans. We have also started to share press releases with a view to maximising reach and impact across the region.

Additionally, in the possible absence of a national conference organised by Natural England, the regional group thought it would be worthwhile organising an



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event for the region. The Northumberland LAF have volunteered to host the day, with a couple of key items on the agenda, to be held later in the year.

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 subsequent stages of the plan was deferred pending assimilation of the Government's White Paper on Housing published in January 2017. Consultation on the preferred options is expected in June 2018.

Working with Public Health

The LAF's links with public health reflect the role of the natural environment in promoting 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 and 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. While draft strategies have acknowledged the importance of improving public access to green spaces, the LAF has pressed for specific indicators to measure and monitor progress in this regard. We have also stressed the need for Durham County Council's Planning and Assets Department to be involved at the highest level to ensure that local planning and development is aligned to the public health agenda.



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Consultations

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

Durham City Sustainable Transport Strategy and Action Plan 2015-2030
Durham City Neighbourhood Plan

North East England Nature Partnership (NEENP)

Local Nature Partnerships are a key commitment of the Government and its 25 year vision for “*A Green Future*” published in January has provided a clear focus for the NEENP in exploring opportunities for landscape scale change to ensure a healthy environment which will underpin well-being and prosperity in the North East. The LAF has close links with the NEENP with the LAF representative serving as Vice Chair 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 with core funding coming from the local authorities. A variety of initiatives are being pursued including the preparation of a local authority members’ guide to raise awareness of the issues.

Bright Water Landscape Partnership

The LAF representative 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 (HLF). 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. Final confirmation of funding is awaited from HLF and the Environment Agency.

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.



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Access improvements, which started in 2016, are focused on repairing and upgrading to bridleway standard the poorest sections of some of the many old colliery railway lines and waggon-ways that criss-cross the valley in order to open up the area to many more people. The project extends over three local authority areas and the County Durham LAF has joined forces with the Northumberland and Tyne & Wear LAFs to monitor and support access developments. Over the past twelve months this has included a site visit convened by the LOI Access and Woodland Officer to examine some of the developments to date which enabled the LAFs to feedback ideas for further access improvements. Work is now well advanced. Interpretation and promotional initiatives will complete improvements, including a new Visitor Centre at Winlaton Mill, which is due to open in June 2018.

Heritage Coast Management Plan

The final version of the Heritage Coast Management Plan was due to be produced during 2017, but unfortunately we are still waiting to see the document following detailed comments made by the LAF the previous year. It is understood that the final draft has been completed, subject to a Heritage Regulations Assessment, and that the LAF's comments have been taken on board and incorporated in the Plan however it is with regret that there was not support for a linear coastal bridleway route. Once the Plan has been confirmed ongoing assistance will be given to provide constructive comment on the development and management of the heritage coast.

Coastal Access

Representation on coastal access partnerships will be taken up by the LAF once these events occur; these currently appear to be on hold until the Management Plan is published.

However a consultation event was attended by a LAF representative - a site visit arranged by Network Rail concerning the possible closure of a footpath across a railway line (at Hawthorn Hive near Seaham) which the rail authority thought might have safety issues. To assist the public in reaching the coast by other means Network Rail are investigating the possible construction of a footbridge in Hawthorn Dene. We await to find out the results of the consultations which included various persons, including local councillors.



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Lost Ways

Members of the LAF sub-group had been supplied with further information to assist with work in investigating lost routes: the list of Roads Used as Public Paths (RUPPs) which had been identified as suitable for research for possible upgrade to bridleway (following checking the routes on equipment in the Rights of Way office), a guide giving clear information and useful links for those new to undertaking research, and an updated list of lost routes which have had modification applications submitted or are currently being researched. Natural England had sent the LAF of the latest edition of Phil Wadey's book on Restoring the Record, which was given to the sub-group for research. A member of the group who has done extensive research work, and submitted a number of modification applications, is due to receive help with recompense of some expenses courtesy of agreement with the local British Horse Society (BHS) committee. Research work can be expensive. Many modification applications have been submitted by BHS volunteers outwith the LAF and who now have good extensive knowledge of preparing applications. It is hoped to tap into this knowledge to help the sub-group with research work in the future.

Northumberland Water - Regional Thinking Ahead Workshop

A member of the LAF attended a workshop organised by Northumberland Water to bring together different organisations and partnerships to share information. The purpose of the workshop was to develop partnership working on flood plains and environmental issues such as conservation. This was one of a series of catchment workshops with a view to a regional workshop being held to develop a 5 year Business Plan 2020-2025 with partners. As part of the workshop it was discovered Northumbrian Water has 62 volunteer rangers in the region who inspect watercourses, and paths and byways close to water for obstructions, and who then report any issues to Rights of Way Officers. As the Rights of Way Team were unaware of the existence of the rangers and had not received any reports to date it was suggested that a representative from the team present to the LAF. This was duly organised for the last LAF meeting in April and this was useful to provide a contact point for the Rights of Way team and for exchange of information.



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Common Land and Village Greens

During the course of the year work on reviewing the ownership of greens and commons with Land Registry was completed which should assist the Council with management and enforcement issues relating to Common Land and Village Greens in the future. In addition the village green register maps have been included on the Council's website. The LAF continues to be a consultee by the County Council on applications for deregistration of common land and village greens. There have been no such applications in the year.

Public Access to County Council Land

During this last year meetings have taken place between relevant officers from the County Council and LAF members to discuss and progress Land Dedication by the County Council. Council officers decided that it was not necessary to dedicate land for public use because the Council was quite amenable to identifying new sites within its ownership across the County for public recreation on a permissive basis. Council officers were concerned that full dedication would result in loss of control over these sites, which officers stated is proving to be an issue on existing sites in the County where historically the public has unrestricted open access.

At the last meeting of this group three target areas were identified by officers for new sites, Shildon, Seaham and Stanley. In particular **Shildon** – Coundon (Blackie Boy reclamation site), Stockton and Darlington Railway at West Auckland, Eldon (Adelaide Colliery reclamation site) **Seaham** - Dawden Dene. **Stanley** - Cragside (Windmill and Heaviside Woods) Harperly/Pea Woods, Tanfield Lea Local Nature Reserve, Oxhill Pea Road , East Stanley (Beamish Mary woodland).

It has been agreed that Tom Bolton, Pat Holding and relevant officers from the County Council will visit these sites to assess their suitability. To date good progress has been made on this project and if these sites are suitable they will provide a valuable contribution to the sites available to the public for access and recreation.

River Tees Rediscovered Project

Following discussions during the previous year on establishing a website for the Teesdale Way, Durham LAF has been represented on a workshop established by the River Tees Rediscovered Partnership with the aim of developing the



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Teesdale Way and encouraging its greater use. With a large proportion of the Tees flowing through the county it is hoped that this initiative will provide some very real benefits for those both using it and offering services to walkers.

Press Releases

We have been able to make press releases at appropriate times of the year regarding two issues we are concerned about.

a) Sheep worrying- Against a background of rising cases of sheep worrying we asked all dog walkers to keep their dogs on leads when walking on footpaths in fields occupied by livestock .

b) Hedge cutting- We issued a press release ahead of the main hedge cutting season, starting in September, to encourage farmers to put up warning boards of cutting in progress and to clear roads where cuttings present a danger of causing punctures to cyclist's tyres.

Cycling

The Governments Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS) has delayed County Durham's new Cycling Strategy, which is being re-drafted to incorporate walking; but the Plan should be ready for public consultation during 2018. The LAF will be looking to ensure it maximises opportunities for raising levels of cycling for everyday journeys, which have been too low in the county for too long. Meanwhile, we have been working with members of the British Horse Society to identify and record bridleways and old roads currently missing from the Definitive Map of Rights of Way. These will make available, and secure for the long-term, cycling routes, particularly in our rural areas and around the former mining communities.

A66 Trans Pennine Project- non motorised user consultation

We were invited by the Highways Agency to a consultation on 16 February 2018 ahead of developing plans for the Scotch Corner to Penrith A66 upgrade project due to be completed by 2028. This consultation is on-going with the opportunity to influence the design of the upgrade to benefit non-motorised users.



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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 scope and development of the Council's third ROWIP 2015-2018 Walk, Cycle, Ride. The Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) is due for renewal in 2018. The ROWIP remains a statutory requirement for local authorities and is an important document for setting out the action the Council would take to provide a Public Rights of Way (PROW) network which met current and future needs and demand.

North Pennines AONB Partnership

The LAF is a member of the North Pennines AONB Partnership and plays an active part in its Pennine National Trails Northern Working Group (PNTNWG) and Access and Rights of Way Working Group (ARWWG). The Pennine National Trails Partnership (PNTTP) is funded by Natural England and its budget has been maintained at the same level for a further year. The PNTTP has been involved in a wide range of work – an access project with Experience Community, which has mapped and video'd four Pennine Trails for disabled people; the England's Great Walking Trails project, developing seven Pennine Way itineraries for overseas visitors, including one in the North Pennines, and within the North Pennines the volunteer Pennine Way Champions, whose footpath surveys will be collated in a report to be published soon and with funding for a further year, during which possible digital reporting will be explored.

In the ARWWG, issues considered have included the successful completion of the "Raising the Standard" restoration of the Coast-to-Coast path at Nine Standards Rigg; potential new locations for the popular Donate-a-Gate scheme beyond the North Pennines and the return of the North Pennines Walking Festival in the first two weeks of July. A particular highlight was the exhibition of William Smith's geological map of 1815 at the Bowlees Visitor Centre. A major focus for next year will be further development of a North Pennines long-distance circular trail.



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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.