

Scrutiny Sub-Committee for Looking After the Environment

19 June 2006



“Open for Business” - Report of the Access to the Durham Countryside Scrutiny Working Group

Report of the Head of Overview and Scrutiny

Purpose of Report

1. To introduce the attached report of the Scrutiny Working Group which has carried out an investigation into access to the countryside in County Durham.

Background

2. This project was initiated by members following the implementation of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 in relation to open access land in County Durham. The project also supported one of the Council's improvement priorities for which the outcome was improved access to and enjoyment of the countryside.
3. The investigation looked at the opportunities and implications of public access and how the rights of way network was being improved to meet current and projected needs. Evidence was taken from officers in the Environment Service, from the Countryside Agency and English Heritage, the Local Access Forum and one of the Primary Care NHS Trusts. Consultation was also undertaken with user groups and landowners and members walked a number of routes and met with local volunteers during the course of the project.

Findings

4. The Working Group noted the significant investment in rights of way and countryside issues by the County Council since the 1980's, which initially had been supported by the Countryside Commission. Currently, there is no overall County Council strategy in relation to access and rights of way, but the requirements of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act will require all highways authorities to have a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) in place by 2007. Work is currently underway on the ROWIP and it is this and the Action Plan underpinning it that will provide a basis for development of a future

Strategy. The main themes of the report (which will be the subject of a brief presentation to the Sub-Committee) concern:

- **The requirement to deliver the Rights of Way Improvement Plan, at the very minimum, within relevant statutory timescales (by the end of 2007), and issues which members believe should be considered in the Plan**
 - **Consideration by the Council of whether there would be any benefits in dedicating land in its ownership for public access under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, 2000.**
 - **Definitive Map Issues – Tackling the backlog of modification orders and improving the timescales for determining other types of orders.**
 - **Other issues (role of Local Access Forum, legal costs, recognition of volunteers, charging for orders).**
 - **Review of the recommendations in the report (six months after its consideration by Cabinet is suggested)**
5. The recommendations are set out in detail in Section Thirteen of the main report. Given the size of the report, an Executive Summary has been prepared for wider circulation, and this is also attached.

Recommendation

6. You are asked to approve the report for submission to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and then to Cabinet.

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