

## COUNTY COUNCIL

19 JUNE 2019

### PUBLIC QUESTIONS

#### **Question from Barbara Herd**

Firstly, are Councillors aware that the County Council is failing in its Statutory duty to make sure that obstructions to public rights of way are removed, by failing to act against some landowners who have barred access to rights of way which are on the definitive map? What oversight is there of adherence to the Council's duties with respect to protecting Rights of Way for the public, and will more resource be made available for this?

Secondly, I am very encouraged that two Officers are being recruited to advance the processing of Definitive Map Modification Order applications; what monitoring will be in place to check on progression of these applications? Both ensuring that obstructions are removed and ensuring lost routes are recorded again are of great importance in improving access for the public to safe recreational spaces that improve health and mental well-being, and in protecting Durham's rich heritage for future generations, and are worthy of investment even in these difficult times.

#### **Response (provided by the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Economic Regeneration)**

I would like to thank Barbara Herd for her question, which highlights the importance of our network of Public Rights of Way.

Ensuring that rights of way are kept open to the public is of course a statutory duty, but like many other Council duties, this has to be addressed with due regard to the resources available. There are 3,500 km of public rights of way in County Durham, and therefore work has to be prioritised.

Whilst we do regularly take enforcement action against landowners who have barred access to rights of way, it is unfortunately inevitable that at any given time a number of paths will be obstructed, either deliberately or through neglect.

In relation to oversight of this work, the County Durham Local Access Forum is a statutory body which advises the County Council on a range of matters relating to public rights of way and access to the countryside. The County Council has to have regard to the advice of the Local Access Forum, and two members of the Cabinet sit as members of the Forum.

Members of the public can also contact the Forum if they believe that the Council is not carrying out its duties effectively, or that additional resources are needed, and the Forum will consider these matters and advise the Council accordingly.

I am pleased to say that in response to the recent increase in workload, interviews for two new members of staff to process the Definitive Map Modification Order applications are taking place this week. The public register of applications will enable the public to monitor progress in this area of work, but it is also envisaged that there will be regular update meetings arranged with the leading applicants.

I can confirm that the County Council recognises the value of public rights of way for health and well-being, and as part of our local heritage, and will continue to support this area of work

### **Question from Nick Brown**

Having lived for a year with significant disruption caused by the closure of a vital community link, council officers have presented residents of Witton Park, High and Low Etherley, Toft Hill, Witton-le-Wear, High Grange, Hamsterley, Howden-le-Wear and Hunwick with four options for the future of their bridge including the very unpopular prospect of closing this historic structure for good, permanently splitting their community. What steps is the council taking to ensure that the bridge can be reopened to vehicular traffic?

### **Response (provided by Cllr Brian Stephens, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Local Partnerships)**

Firstly, I would like to thank Mr Brown for the question. Last year, while undertaking scheduled repairs to Witton Park Bridge, we discovered serious structural defects, which left us with no choice but to extend the planned 20-week closure.

Since then, a detailed assessment has confirmed the bridge is structurally unsound and must remain closed in the interest of public safety.

A decision on the future of the bridge has not been made but we wanted to share with the public, especially the local communities most affected, the four options available and the associated costs.

A report will be prepared to help the council consider and decide upon the best way forward.