

## COUNTY DURHAM LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

At a Meeting of **County Durham Local Access Forum** held in Committee Room 2 on **Monday 27 January 2025 at 5.00 pm**

### **Present:**

**P Holding (Chair)**

### **Members of the Committee:**

T Bolton, B Hodgson, A Marshall, A Johnson, M Knipe, J Stephenson, E.Wilton, P Westgarth and N Sharpe

### **Officers:**

M Ogden, Access and Rights of Way Team Leader  
H Barber, Senior Rights of Way Officer  
L Gladders, Senior Committee Services Officer and LAF Secretary

### **1 Welcome, Introduction and Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from G Hughes, J Welch and Councillors E Scott and J Shuttleworth.

### **2 Election of Chair**

**Agreed:** that P Holding be elected as Chair for the ensuing year.

### **3 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of Interest.

### **4 Minutes of the Meeting held on 27 October 2024**

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 October 2024 were confirmed as a correct record.

#### Update on Minute number 13: Bright Water Landscape Project

T Bolton provided an update to the Forum noting that a final Board meeting including final accounts was expected to be held on 6 March, however full details were not yet known. He further referenced recent correspondence

received from G Hughes which queried whether it was known how Bright Water proposed to deal with flooding issues as result of the rising water table which he stated severely impeded access in a number of areas. T Bolton explained that his was recollection that P Black had addressed this. A further query was raised around the provision of interpretation boards.

In response the Access and Rights of Way Team Leader advised that some interpretation boards were already in place, and these were being monitored across a period. With regard to the concerns raised by G Hughes, relating to the rising water table, it was expected that this would be raised with P Black if the current infrastructure was not coping.

T Bolton concluded by advising that it was expected that the final accounts would be considered at the final Board meeting, and when made available would provide the LAF Secretary with a copy for circulation to the Forum.

#### Agricultural Property Relief

B Hodgson in referencing the government reform noted that concern raising amongst farmers that their farms and family inheritance was at risk because of the proposed new tax. He therefore asked for the Forums support in lobbying the government to review their proposals.

## **5 Opening the Way: The Ramblers' Strategic Ambition - 2024**

The Chair welcomed forum member Mike Knipe to provide a short presentation on Opening the Way: The Ramblers' Strategic Ambition 2024 and Beyond.

M Knipe explained that the strategy set out the ambition to address the inequities and imbalance identified by prioritising the needs of communities who had the least access and faced the most barriers to walking in nature. The strategy was focused around three key foundations including its vision, purpose and impact and sought to achieve the following outcomes:

**Outcome one:** Improved provision, quality and information on access, paths, and rights of way.

**Outcome two:** Improved confidence and knowledge to walk outdoors.

**Outcome three:** Improved participation of communities that have the least access and most barriers to the outdoors.

**Outcome four:** Improved support for the Ramblers' charitable cause.

The presentation provided further details on successes to date and provided case studies against each of the four outcomes.

M Knipe went on to explain that the Ramblers had six enablers which would assist in realising the strategy which included:

- Sustainable income and investment
- A diverse body of staff, trustees, members, and volunteers
- Streamlined partnerships, programmes and networks
- Targeted advocacy, policy, and public affairs
- Data, insight, and digital innovation
- Fit for purpose governance and operating models.

A Johnson asked what the advantages were of becoming a member of the Ramblers. In response M Knipe advised that for £43 per year, you received access, discounts on kit and walkers' insurance, along with the added benefits of the social and navigational aspect, map reading training and optional first aid courses.

Further discussion took place regarding local Ramblers' groups their calendar of events and trips and how the groups were promoted on social media, including Facebook.

T Bolton asked whether there was any liaison between DCC and the Ramblers Association in terms of promotion of walking. He referenced historical discussions between AAP and parish councils regarding walking groups and wondered whether there was any joined up work being done in this regard of whether the strategy was held in isolation. M Knipe advised that there were some connections already in place with County Councillors and further referenced partnership work with Durham County Council in celebrating the 50th year and funding which had been provided to support associated incentives.

The Access and Rights of Way Team Leader asked whether there was a timescale on the strategy or whether it was open ended. M Knipe advised that the new strategy overlapped with a 5-year strategy which had been published under the previous management team. M Ogden further noted that the aims and objectives of the plan were laudable, however he did note that local authorities were not mentioned within the plan, and he thought it would have been evident within the strategy that a case was being put forward for budget support given that local authorities would be able to help deliver on some of the objectives set out.

## **6 National/Regional Issues**

### **a A66 Northern Trans-Pennine Project**

The Access and Rights of Way Team Leader referred to a letter previously circulated which referred to the A66 Northern Trans-Pennine project legal challenge to the Secretary of State's Development Consent Order decision. He advised that a new appeal had been lodged, and the outcome of that appeal was awaited. In the meantime, however, some investigatory works were now able to take place on the land and further updates would be provided when available.

### **b North East Travel Plan**

The Forum noted that the North East Travel Plan, which was a North East Combined Authority project, sought to make travel across the North East greener, safer, and more reliable. Consultation on the plan was due to end on the 2 January 2025. A Johnson noted that she had been made aware of the plan and was disappointed that there was no reference to equestrian users, however, accepted that the plan was urban focused on travel to work.

### **c Environmental Land Management Schemes**

The Forum received an update from B Hodgson regarding the scheme, noting that work was ongoing in this area to try and secure more funding from government. He noted that there was a significant amount of paperwork to be completed in order to access the funding to increase hedgerow, wildflower and tree planting however, there were wildlife benefits to this.

The Access and Rights of Way Team Leader commented that under the old countryside stewardship there was permissive access whereby landowners could get paid for access, and this was being reintroduced however there were various restrictions around this and noted information around temporary permissive access for mobility access, however there were a lot of unanswered questions around what would happen when the access was removed. However, it was hoped that further information and consultation was forthcoming.

## **7 Update from Rights of Way Team (including Lost Ways)**

The Forum received an update from the Senior Rights of Way Team Officer which provide details around current workload, staffing, and progress in

relation to the processing of Lost Ways and Definitive Map Modification Orders.

H Barber advised that there had been little change to the previous update, with over 350 applications still to be processed. She further referenced Trimdon Station walkway Definitive Map Modification Application, which had recently been considered and endorsed by the Highways Committee that a Modification Order be made under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to add to the Definitive Map and Statement a public footpath along the applied for route from Station Road to Footpath 4.

The Senior Rights of Way Team Leader further provided details regarding staffing, however noted whilst staffing levels were stable, the team were being called on more frequently to comment on planning applications which was taking up a significant amount of Officer time.

## **8 Stockton and Darlington Railway - Walking and Cycling Routes**

The Forum received an update from the Access and Rights of Way Team Leader which provided details regarding the ongoing work and negotiation taking place with land agents ahead of the official start of the Stockton and Darlington Railway 200 S&DR200 taking place from March to September 2025.

M Ogden further advised that the Project Officer's contract was due to expire at the end of March this year and anything carried forward from this role would potentially need to be picked up by the Access and Rights of Way Team.

A link to the website which provided all details of the S&DR200 could be accessed at <https://www.sdr200.co.uk/>

## **9 Northern Saints Trails**

The Forum received an update from the Access and Rights of Way Team Leader which provided details around 'The Way of Hope' which would broadly follow the existing Weardale Way and complement existing Northern Saints Trail routes. M Ogden explained that meetings were expected to take place in the coming weeks with landowners and he was also due to meet with D Potts, former Northern Saints Trail Coordinator and retired LAF member to discuss his ideas for the Trails.

Further updates would be provided when available.

## **10 Durham City Green Corridor**

The Forum received an update from E Wilton, National Trust on the partnership project between the Trust and Durham County Council with a jointly funded project manager, hosted by the National Trust.

It was explained that the Durham City Green Corridor covered the northeastern fringe of Durham City, along approximately a 6.5-mile corridor of the River Wear. The aim being to work with people and nature to enhance the natural environment whilst providing a valuable accessible resource for both visitors and the local community. The National Trust's property, Crook Hall Gardens, was intended to serve as a hub or gateway between the urban and natural settings.

Further details were reported in respect of public consultation and engagement with key stakeholders and community members including foundation setting with key focus groups.

Further discussion took place around land slipping and issues around mine water and responsibilities of the Coal Authority.

**AGREED:** That N Sharpe and G Hughes be nominated to represent the Forum where possible at focus group meetings.

## **11 Public Access to Council-owned Land**

The Forum noted that the current Head of Corporate Property and Land was retiring at the end of March and once her replacement was in position, the Forum would seek to discuss outstanding access requests. An update, if possible, would be provided at next the meeting in April.

## **12 North Pennines National Landscape**

The Forum noted the minutes of the Access and Recreation Working Group held on 1 October 2024.

## **13 Health**

It was noted that there were no minutes yet available from the last Healthy Weight Alliance Group.

#### **14 Membership Update**

There were no membership updates to report.

#### **15 Member Training**

Forum members agreed that the following topics could be picked up for discussion at a future meeting:

- Wolsingham Wayfarers – July meeting with site visit
- National Trust Strategy – E Wilton to facilitate.

#### **16 Work Programme**

**AGREED:** that the work programme be updated to reflect recent additions and removal of projects which have completed.

#### **17 Date, Time and Venue of Next Meeting**

The next meeting was scheduled to be held on 14 April 2025 at 5.00 p.m.