

# Listening to the people who really know

## Introduction

Members of Local Access Forums (LAFs) have in-depth knowledge of the way people can gain access to their environment. Access might be achieved through the use of local rights of way, as a result of rights over designated access land, or through access which is permitted on a non statutory basis. Forum members include general users, land owners, and specialists with an interest - for example - in tourism, sport, nature conservation or access for those with disabilities.

In May 2006 Derbyshire County Council invited members from the two LAFs covering Derbyshire to a seminar where they:

- Learnt about the work which the County Council has already carried out as part of the process of developing the Derbyshire Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP)
- Were asked to offer advice on how the Plan should be further developed.

## Why does access matter?

Before looking at the detail of the RoWIP, LAF members considered the wide range of ways in which access in general, and rights of way in particular, are important in our society. Following discussion, the prime importance of rights of way was seen in terms of:

- The contribution they make to the nation's physical and psychological health
- The opportunities they give people to explore new places and to relax, and
- As a means through which we can exercise our fundamental right of having free access to our surroundings.

## What is a Rights of Way Improvement Plan?

A RoWIP sets out the ways in which access can be improved. Derbyshire County Council's duty to produce a RoWIP stems from sections of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

The RoWIP process provides us all with an opportunity to:

- Take an objective and strategic view of the Public Rights of Way network and other opportunities for access
- Review the extent to which access provision in the county complements current patterns of demand and land use
- Identify ways in which we can better meet the needs of today's users
- Take a forward look

## What is a 'Local Access Forum'?

The two Local Access Forums which cover Derbyshire have been appointed as statutory advisors to the County Council and the Peak District National Park Authority on the improvement of public access for the purpose of open-air recreation and enjoyment of the area.

The Peak District Local Access Forum covers the northern part of the county, comprising the Peak District National Park together with areas around Buxton and Glossop. The Derby and Derbyshire LAF covers the southern and eastern parts of the county as well as Derby City.

## Taking Stock

County council officers have been pulling together a lot of information about rights of way in Derbyshire. In addition a consultation exercise has been carried out to find out what people want from the rights of way network.

After hearing about what the county council had found out, and on the basis of their own experience, LAF members agreed:

- The footpath network in Derbyshire is generally quite good, and appears to be improving. The situation for higher categories of rights of way (bridleways and byways) is not so good. There are fewer routes overall, and in some parts of the county the network is very poor.
- The rights of way network needs to evolve as demand and needs change. Provision in the future should be located where the local need exists (for example in terms of where people want to go horse riding).
- There is also a need for more network links – enabling people to go on circular routes, or take short cuts.
- We still need more information about the county's rights of way network. In particular we need to know more about:
  - \* Permissive paths, and places where people enjoy access without necessarily having a legal right to it.
  - \* The condition of rights of way in the county - we need a clear picture of which paths are accessible to all sections of the community, including the less mobile.
  - \* How public transport provision links into the rights of way network.
- As well as knowing how many miles of rights of way exist in the county, it would be useful to develop a measure of 'connectivity' - the extent to which paths link together



LAF members inspect newly designated access land at Harboro Rocks

## RoWIP Aims and Priorities for Action

LAF members considered five objectives for the Derbyshire RoWIP, and identified the top priorities under each of these

### Aim 1: Ensuring that the existing network is easier to use

For many LAF members 'access for all' is a priority. Barriers, such as stiles and poor surface condition, are a major issue on many rights of way.

- LAF members agreed that maintaining and managing the existing network of rights of way was a priority
- Surfaces need to be appropriate to the location and level of use. Drainage is often the most important factor in managing rights of way, since it is excess water that often causes the most damage. Another particular problem are sites where livestock trample land around gates
- Where stiles need to be retained standards of design should be improved. The emphasis should be on simplicity and minimum maintenance.
- The effectiveness of safety features designed to keep out illegal users (eg motorbikes) was questioned. There was concern that such systems deter legitimate users, preventing access for the less mobile.



### Aim 2: Providing a more connected and accessible network suitable for all users

- Where possible the goal should be to replace traditional stiles with gates, gaps or drop down stiles.

- The process of replacing stiles with gates needs to be done in a way which does not undermine local landscape character. Traditional features, such as squeeze stiles, should be retained, perhaps with alternative access close by.
- Rather than a 'scattergun' approach we should concentrate resources so as to provide useful pockets of useable networks for each class of user. Such a focussed approach could be designed with reference to public transport, cafes and other attractions.
- Gaps currently exist in the network, where - for example - users have to make use of busy roads. One approach in such situations is to provide links on the verge or on the field edge inside the adjacent hedge / wall.
- The bridleway network is inadequate in some parts of the county. One way of rectifying this situation would be to identify sites where footpaths could sensibly be upgraded to become bridleways.

### Aim 3: Developing a safer network

LAF members thought that - while safety was of paramount importance - this objective should be implicit as a part of all activities, rather than seen as a separate set of proposals. Safety measures must be set against a realisation that it is neither feasible nor desirable to eliminate all elements of risk and adventure from the use of rights of way.

- The greatest hazard faced by users comes from road traffic. This risk can be mitigated by the provision of more and safer road crossing points, by the construction of roadside protective structures, and providing a change of surfaces adjacent to road crossings.

LAF members preferred to see this aim replaced with an aim encouraging greater use of and involvement in the network

**Aim 4: Providing an up-to-date and widely available Definitive Map**

LAF members recognised that the definitive map is a specialist tool, and very much a minority interest. However, getting the definitive map and claims register fully operational and up to date will underpin rational and equitable decision making.

- The county's Definitive Map needs to be truly definitive, especially with respect to use of rights of way by vehicles.
- There are still a large number of outstanding claims which need to be addressed
- The claims register needs to be made available on line

**Need Further Information?**

Comments and queries should be addressed to:

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**Aim 5: To improve provision of information about access to the countryside**

- Signage needs to be consistent across the county. Consistency should not be confused with uniformity – what is needed is an appropriate level of signage in different locations. What is appropriate in urban / village settings will be very different to what is appropriate in open country, where too much signage could create clutter and result in the loss of a feeling of remoteness.
- A judgement needs to be made for each site in terms of how much information people need – more is not always better.
- The information provided could include estimated time to reach a certain destination, warnings about categories of users on the path (eg the presence of horse-riders) and any other hazards.
- The County Council should consider adopting a route grading system, which would categorise the condition of the path, and ease of use (on the model used for ski runs). This would be of value to all users, in particular to those with mobility problems.

