Derbyshire County Council

Meeting of Cabinet Member - Environmental Services

12 February 2009

Report of the Strategic Director – Environmental Services

Consultation Paper: Review of Trails and Routes

(1)   **Purpose of Report**   To seek approval for a response to a consultation document from Natural England.

(2)   **Information and Analysis**   Natural England is seeking opinions from stakeholders on the seven recommendations arising from a recent review of trails and routes.

In deciding which trails and routes to look at in its recent review, Natural England identified around 600 named, mainly traffic-free trails and routes for walking, cycling or horse-riding across England. They were routes that can be enjoyed over a series of days as well as for short trips and are promoted, and named on Ordnance Survey maps, as an attraction to visitors as well as local people.   Thirteen of these routes - the National Trails are considered by Natural England to have a reputation as the 'flagship' for all trails and routes.

The aims of the review were to identify:

- who uses the trails and routes and what experiences they seek.
- ways of increasing and diversifying use.
- the differences in quality between National Trails and other routes.
- a new model for the future management and funding of National Trails.

Natural England is particularly interested in:

- the extent to which the County Council supports the seven recommendations.
- how the Authority could be involved in implementing them.

Views are sought through a series of questions relating to each of the seven recommendations. These are set out in the Appendix to this report along with the corresponding responses. The information will be used to decide the way forward and what future role Natural England will have in relation to trails and routes.

Recommendation 1 (The Best Trails and Routes) proposes that national standards should be set for routes other than National Trails by:-

- defining a new category of high quality recreational routes that are of lower quality than National Trails but higher than most rights of way.
- setting national standards for their creation and management.
- implementing an accreditation process to identify these routes based on feedback and technical input from users as well as highway authorities.

Outcomes - this would enable the public to know what standards to expect from routes, encourage Highway Authorities to sustain the quality of the newly recognised routes and may motivate them to invest in other routes with the potential for national recognition. It should also improve the consistency and quality of routes, leading to improved user confidence and increased levels of use.

Recommendation 2 (Visitor information) suggests that information about the best trails and routes should be available in one place. This could be achieved through:-

- developing a new dynamic website providing easy access to information on all the best trails and routes in England - offering downloadable maps and guides, details of circular routes, photographs, opportunities to share experiences and generate personal itineraries.
- a built-in problem reporting system which would automatically alert route managers. The website could evolve into a top quality, nationally and internationally recognised information source, which supports existing local and regional sources. It could be related to the current National Trails website or be a separate entity.

Outcomes - this would meet the identified needs of the public for better information resulting in increased awareness and use. It also offers a simple way to promote the best trails and routes identified in Recommendation 1 above. Issues raised by users will be responded to more rapidly, raising awareness of user concerns amongst authorities and managers.

Recommendation 3 (Management information) highlights how little data there is on how routes other than National Trails are managed and used or on financial costs and benefits. It is proposed to establish a national toolkit of methodologies for collecting and sharing evidence of levels of use, user satisfaction, costs and economic impact for trails and routes.

Outcomes - this will allow managers to have evidence to demonstrate the value of routes, helping them bid for external funds. There will be a national bank of evidence on walking, cycling and horse riding. Authorities will be able to respond to requests for new routes with a greater understanding of potential use and demand.

Recommendation 4 (Natural England Grants for National Trails) has revealed that the current grant system leads to inefficiencies and missed funding opportunities. It is suggested that:-

- the existing grant system is modernised to provide funding packages covering several years, enabling partners to plan ahead and make better long term decisions, including levering in more external funding and getting better value from contractors.
- grants are aligned to activities set out in the Proposed New Management Model for National Trails (see Recommendation 7 below).
- current National Trail Quality Standards are prioritised to ensure that grants reflect what users want and are closely linked to agreed outcomes.

Outcomes - this approach should facilitate better long term planning, allowing National Trails to work up major improvements within existing budget levels.

Recommendation 5 (Volunteering) recognises the role which volunteers have to play in the management and monitoring of some routes and trails. It proposes:-

- assistance with the recruitment and support of more volunteers to help with the management and promotion of trails and routes.
- the capacity for trail staff to seek and encourage volunteer input - identifying the barriers to increased participation and sharing of good practice.
- working more closely with established groups such as Friends of groups for specific trails.

Outcomes - increased public engagement/ "ownership" of trails and routes, with more people actively participating in the monitoring, maintenance and promotion aspects.

Recommendation 6 (Sharing of Expertise) suggests that the expertise held within National Trail teams and amongst local authority staff is not being shared. This could be addressed by:-

- re-assessing the role of Natural England funded Trail Officers and developing a more flexible approach including a wider sharing of skills/ more team working.
- introducing more strategic management to the development of new ideas.
- increasing the opportunities for all staff working on trails and routes to share experience and improve their effectiveness.

Outcomes - efficiency would be increased by matching expertise to tasks within the team and sharing experience nationally. It would also lead to higher quality decisions being taken by all trail and route staff based on better evidence and knowledge.

Recommendation 7 (New Management Model for National Trails)
A new model has been developed to identify changes in the priorities for managing National Trails as they evolve and to help Natural England focus its resources where it can add most value.

It is proposed to:-

- introduce the 'progression model' to focus resources on management activities relevant to each stage in the life of individual National Trails.
- give priority to raising awareness of a trail in its early years and to developing effective maintenance and management systems.
- turn the emphasis to 'adding value' within the surrounding corridor of land once a trail reaches maturity, with maintenance systems in place and day to day management requiring less effort. This could deliver environmental improvements, better access to communities and places of interest, improved integration, joint promotion with other routes and attractions as well as stronger links to centres of population.

Outcomes - more structured progressive management should provide a better focus for development and funding which in turn will provide better access to places of interest and settlements, more environmental improvements, wider promotion leading to greater and more diverse use.

Officer Comments   These should be read in conjunction with the responses contained in the consultation document appended to this report.

Recommendation 1 that national standards should be set for routes other than National Trails is not supported. It is not considered that this is something which either highway authorities or the public would find particularly useful since routes can vary so widely. Whilst they should be fit for purpose, there is also a need to provide a choice of access opportunities for a range of people in completely different circumstances from easy multi-user routes to those which are challenging for the more adventurous individual users. This does not mean some routes are necessarily "second best" or of lower quality, just different and should be allowed to stand alone.

It is felt that Natural England has missed an opportunity to promote its Greenways programme as Greenway development does have a set of standards that are recognised both nationally and across the rest of Europe. Derbyshire County Council has had considerable success in developing a strategic network of Greenways throughout the County.

Recommendation 2 which advocates that information about the best trails and routes should be available in one place is supported. A central source of information would be very useful for highway authorities and the public/ users. The existing National Trails website could be developed to fulfil this role and would benefit from smart links to other relevant sites such as that for the County Council. In view of the benefits which it could provide, the Authority would be able to contribute data and possibly devote some staff or volunteer time to this. There may also be scope for the private sector to manage or sponsor the information source in some way. In Derbyshire there are good established links with local tourism organisations who promote this sort of information.

It should be recognised that not everyone is able to easily access information electronically and this issue also needs to be addressed.

With regard to **Recommendation 3** it is agreed that there is generally little data available on how routes other than National Trails are managed and used, or on their financial costs and benefits. In Derbyshire a detailed monitoring programme is in place to record users on newly developed Greenways but any national advice on how to collect and share this or other data would be useful. The data itself could be used for grant applications or to help with travel to work/ school plans.

Recommendation 4 is supported. It is agreed that some changes to the current grant system for National Trails could be made to improve its effectiveness and value. Suggestions include the payment of grants up front and funding packages spanning several years.

However, there is some concern about grants being too closely aligned to the activities set out in the proposed new management model referred to in Recommendation 7.

It is agreed that there are many opportunities to engage more effectively with volunteers as identified in **Recommendation 5**. The main volunteering opportunities relate to wardening/reporting problems and involvement in maintenance work. There is scope to encourage local groups to adopt sections of trails or routes or set up volunteer rangers like Sustrans has for the National Cycle Network. More use could be made of existing organisations such as the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) to help coordinate practical tasks.

Whilst it is acknowledged that volunteers have a vital and valuable role to play, they are not a free resource and need funding/ dedicated officer time to contribute effectively.

It is agreed, as set out in **Recommendation 6**, that the expertise held within National Trail teams and amongst local authority staff is not being shared.

Ideas on how to improve the sharing of knowledge and expertise between professionals include the possibility of a web based solution with discussion forum/ section on best practice, an Annual Conference or benchmarking clubs.

As far as the new management model proposed under **Recommendation 7** is concerned however, this is considered too simplistic. The County Council has considerable experience of attracting additional funding to its access improvement and Greenway development work by successfully incorporating wider agendas such as those covering health, sustainable transport and green infrastructure and sees no benefit to aligning budgets to such a model. The County Council would be willing to share these experiences with Natural England or others and will continue to seek out additional funding for all access work.

In preparing this report the relevance of the following factors has been considered; financial, legal, prevention of crime and disorder, equality of opportunity; and environmental, health, human resources, property and transport considerations.

(4)   **Background Papers**   Natural England's consultation document is appended to this report.

(5)   **Key Decision**   No.

(6)   **Officer Recommendations**   That:-

6.1   The officer comments set out in the report be endorsed as being those of the Authority.

6.2   The Strategic Director - Environmental Services be authorised to forward the responses to the consultation questions to Natural England.

NATURAL ENGLAND CONSULTATION DOCUMENT
REVIEW OF TRAILS AND ROUTES

DERBYSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S RESPONSE

Q1. The Best Trails and Routes

The findings of the review suggest that national standards should be set for routes other than National Trails.

a.   How useful do you think highway authorities would find this?

Very Useful   Quite useful   **Not useful**

Make any comments to explain your answer here …

The Authority supports the provision of good quality routes, but this is possibly not the right approach because there are too many variables, such as landscape, terrain, ground conditions and type of user to be provided for. Routes should be fit for purpose but there is also a need to provide a choice of access opportunities for a range of people in completely different circumstances from easy routes to those which are challenging for the more adventurous users. This doesn't mean some routes are necessarily "second best" or of lower quality, just different and should be allowed to stand alone.

Perhaps a horizontal rather than a vertical hierarchy would work better. There may be scope for some elements of standardisation eg path furniture and signage (both along and onto the route itself but also to indicate local amenities/visitor attractions/ public transport connections etc). However, if standards are too prescriptive they could be misleading and not at all useful in terms of where a particular route should be slotted in - "other" routes/ rights of way can vary enormously as indeed can the national trails themselves.

Surprisingly the existence of Greenways, which have European recognition and their own set of standards/ definitions, is not acknowledged.

b.   How useful do you think the public, both users and potential users, would find this?

Very useful   Quite useful   **Not useful**

Make any comments to explain your answer here …

People will want to know what to expect on a particular route in terms of gradients, surface, barriers etc so they can plan their visit. It will be far more useful to provide this information on a route by route basis, rather than relying on a set of national standards into which an individual route may not fit particularly well.

c. If national standards were set, what criteria do you think should be used to help define the 'best' routes?

The route is :	Priority		
	High	medium	low
Promoted and managed by the local authority		x	
Way marked throughout its length	x		
Promoted on dedicated webpage/leaflets	x		
Maintained to a high standard	x		
Stile free			x
Available to all users (multi-use)		x	
Managed by a dedicated trail officer (ft or pt)			x
The route :			
Passes through landscapes of high scenic quality			x
Passes places of interest		x	
Passes places to eat or drink		x	
Starts and finishes in urban settlements			x
Has main access points served by public transport		x	
Others, please specify The routes start to form strategic links to each other to create a network	x		

Make any comments to explain your answers here …

Stile free would scupper many routes, including many existing national trails

Managed by a dedicated trail officer would be completely unrealistic

If a route "passes" places of interest/places to eat or drink they should be signposted

It would be unrealistic to always have a route starting and finishing in urban settlements. A better way might be to say that a certain percentage of routes should achieve this but that all should have good public transport connections to the start and finish.

Need different routes to meet different needs.

'Scenic quality', 'landscape value' and 'places of interest' are subjective at a national, regional and local level.

d. Should the public be involved in selecting the best routes?

Yes   **No**

e. Is Natural England the right organisation to lead on this?

Yes   No

f. Who else should be involved?

All Trail developers

e.	Natural England already hosts the National Trails web site and oversees national trails management. The organisation has access to Exchequer funding and could influence government policy
f.	Sustrans already has a strategic network of cycleways – the off road sections of which are multi user, providing at a minimum for walkers and easy access routes

Q2. Visitor Information

The findings suggest that information about the best trails and routes in England should be available in one place.

a.	Do you think this would be useful to highway authorities?

   <u>Very useful</u>	quite useful	not useful

b.	Do you think this would be useful to the public, existing users and other groups?

   <u>Very useful</u>	quite useful	not useful

Make any comments to explain your answers here …

There needs to be a central starting point for people to find information (could the existing National Trails web site fulfil this role rather than trying to reinvent the wheel?) Detail may be held more locally eg by local authorities, tourist information sites but must be accessible via smart links from the central web site.

Need to address the issue of reaching people who do not currently use routes and trails. Making the main outlet for information online will inevitably make it difficult to reach some groups that fall into this category.

c.	It is likely that this central source of information will be on-line. Which of the following features do you think would be useful to customers?

Priority	High	medium	Low
Detailed maps showing where the trails and routes are	x		
Birds eye views of routes (eg Google earth)		x	
Free downloadable route maps/directions	x		
Reviews from other users		x	
Audio route guides		x	
Ability to design personal itineraries	x		
Maps/directions for short circular walks from trails & routes		x	
Place to leave comments/complaints		x	
Pictures of trails and routes	x		
Public transport information	x		
Information on places to eat or drink	x		
Information on guided walks & events		x	
Information on accommodation	x		
Information on cycle hire		x	
Others – please say which Whether support services such as baggage handling are available	x		

d. Please indicate how your organisation would be willing to contribute to a central source of information:

Contribution	yes	No	Possibly
Data	x		
Funding		x	
Staff time			x
Volunteer time			x
Other			

e. What roles do you think the private sector could have in either managing or sponsoring such an information source?

Contribution	Yes	No	Possibly
Hosting			x
Funding			x
Staff time			x
Data collection/sharing time			x
Sponsorship			x

Make any comments to explain your answers here …

If tourism organisations count as private sector they could play a useful part in this. Eg Visit Derbyshire (Destination management organisations)

This could be financed through an "opt out" visitor payback system via commercial operations connected with trail use – baggage handling, itinerary planners, cycle hire

Q3. Management Information

The review found that little data is collected on how routes, other than National Trails, are managed and used, or on their financial costs and benefits.

a. How useful would you find national advice on how to collect and share such data?

Very useful   **useful**   not very useful

b. What information would you like access to nationally consistent data on, and what could you use this data for?

- Data on use of local services by route users - type and amount of money spent
- Extent to which public transport is used to access routes and which mode
- Type of visit - day use, weekend trips, challenge walk
- Purpose of journey – leisure, local to work, school, shops
- Number and type of users (walkers, cyclists, horse riders etc)
- Time of use – day of week, time of year, etc

The latter two are already collected for key Greenways in Derbyshire.

Figures could be useful for grant applications. Also help determine contribution to local economy in terms of jobs etc or with travel to work/ school planning.

Q4. Natural England Grants for National Trails

The review found that the current grant system for National Trails leads to inefficiencies and missed funding opportunities.

a.   If your authority currently receives a grant from Natural England for the management of a National Trail please tell us if you think changes to the system could be made to improve effectiveness and value.

Yes – it could be greatly improved

<u>Yes – but it could be a bit better</u>

No – there is no need, the system works fine

b.   If some aspects of spending could be scheduled over several years would this increase efficiency?

    <u>A great increase</u>   a slight increase   no difference

Please give examples of potential increased efficiencies here

A 3 year budget would allow for planning work to make most efficient use of staff and resources. This could involve bulk purchase of materials and the setting of term contracts to ease / speed work put out to contractors.

This could allow for match funding to be secured. Or for business support from private enterprise (allowing them to plan their trading operations)

c.   What other changes could be made to improve the current system ?

Budgets/ grants could be paid up front.

Q5. Volunteering

The review found that volunteers are actively involved in the management and monitoring of some routes and trails.

a.   Do opportunities exist to engage more effectively with volunteers on trails in your area?

<u>Many opportunities</u>   Few opportunities   No opportunities

b.   What do you think are the main volunteering opportunities

	High	Medium	Low
Wardening and reporting problems	x		
Practical volunteering tasks in organised groups			x
Lengthsmen involved in maintenance work	x		
Working with the public eg guided walks and talks			x

c.   What do you think is required to encourage more people to volunteer their time and expertise to contribute to the management and promotion of trails and routes?

Volunteers play a vital role but are not a free resource and need funding/ dedicated officer time to work effectively

Make use of existing organisations, such as BTCV, to help organise and run tasks to a known standard. This could also involve multi day tasks in the form of working holidays

Encourage local groups to adopt a section of trail.

Set up volunteer wardens like Sustrans has for the National Cycle Network.

Q6. Trails and Routes Staff

The review found that the expertise held within National Trail teams and local authority staff is not being shared. Natural England is keen to ensure that expertise is shared between all people managing routes.

a.   Do you agree with this finding?

Yes   No

b.   Do you have ideas on how to improving sharing of knowledge and expertise between professionals?

Possibility of a web based solution including a best practice section, discussion forum where issues can be debated or questions posted, a regular electronic newsletter. The web site would need to be properly managed and kept live/ up to date for people to benefit. The Best practice section could be added to the Rights of Way Good Practice Guide already hosted by IPROW.

Facilitated networking opportunities such as an Annual Conference.

A bench marking club and/or bench marking visits, which worked well for cycling and was funded by the Dept for Transport via Cycle England. This looked at both the systems and practical solutions used by members leading to an informal rating within the peer group.

Q7. A New Management Model for National Trails

This question is aimed at highway authorities who currently contribute to the management and funding of National Trails

a.   As individual National Trails reach maturity there are more opportunities to work with health, education, agriculture and other sectors to improve the delivery of appropriate local and national targets. This could help attract more funding. Would you be willing to work to increase funding both from local authorities and elsewhere to provide a better customer focussed product?

Yes   **Maybe**   No

b. What else could be done to encourage highway authorities and other organisations to contribute a larger share of the costs of managing and promoting National Trails?

Trails need to be included in transport and accessibility planning in each highway authority area and linked to LAA targets and to Local Development Frameworks being developed by Planning authorities. Some funding could come from LTP sources by redirecting small amounts from 'road' budgets on top of anything that might currently be available for walking and cycling.

Tourism Partnerships could be encouraged to operate visitor payback schemes similar to 'Fix the Fells' in the Lake District.

c. Which aspects of the current spending on national trails provide the best opportunities for gaining better value/reducing costs

	High	Medium	Low	Please say why
Trail Staff		x		Someone will be needed to coordinate work/ volunteers and liaise with stakeholders
Support Costs		x		Staff incur support costs
Trail maintenance		x		Rapid repairs avoid increased costs
Trail improvements	x			Higher specs need less maintenance in longer term and easier to get match funding on capital spend
Marketing		x		If linked to pay back scheme

Please make any comments to support your answers here

d. The review findings suggest that there are opportunities to improve trail corridors though new ways of working with stakeholders. Examples include development and promotion of link routes, circular walks, and improved environmental quality through better targeting of agri-environment schemes.

Do you agree with this finding?

Yes   In part   No

Please make any comments to explain your answer here
Link to Greenways, to/ from centres of population and places of interest, Green Infrastructure funding, Growth Zones, Accessibility Planning, sustainable transport, green tourism activity.