

Natural England Board



Meeting: 12
Date: 16 September 2008

Paper No: **NEB PU12 04**

Title: **Natural England's Draft Policy on Access**

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1. Purpose

- 1.1. The purpose of this paper is to present Natural England's draft policy on access (Annex 1) for the Board's approval.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. It is recommended that the Board consider and agree the draft policy prior to a formal external stakeholder consultation. A final draft of the policy will be circulated to all Board Members for comment, prior to sign off by the Chair.

3. Context

- 3.1. The Board considered the broad context for access at its June Briefing, as part of the update on our work under our Strategic Outcome 2: people are inspired to value and conserve the natural environment. This draft policy addresses Objective 2.3: people have places to access and enjoy a high quality natural environment, and follows discussion with Board Outcome Group 2 in September 2008. An informal consultation on a working draft of this paper was undertaken with external stakeholders in July/August 2008. Annex 2 provides a summary of the views received from this consultation.
- 3.2. Evidence shows that people have become less connected to the natural environment over recent decades. Our refreshed Outcome 2 is predicated on the need for a step-change in people's engagement with the natural environment. This draft policy is addressed at how we can ensure that people have places to access and enjoy a high quality natural environment.
- 3.3. Access to a high quality natural environment delivers a wide range of economic, environmental and social benefits. Our work is demonstrating how access to high quality natural environments can improve physical health and well-being and is providing evidence of the benefits to local economies of leisure spend by people they attract. Our green infrastructure work delivers improvement to social cohesion, regeneration, cultural focus and citizenship, by increasing the diversity of people sharing spaces. Education policy is drawing on the knowledge of the educational benefit of environmental study and experience. Personal development, particularly for children and young people, is heavily stimulated by direct experience of the natural environment.

- 3.4. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 mandates Natural England to: promote access to the countryside and open space; to encourage open air recreation; and to secure the provision and improvement of facilities for the study, understanding and enjoyment of the natural environment.

4. Summary of the draft policy

- 4.1. Natural England wants all people in England to have the opportunity to be inspired by the natural environment through outdoor activity and especially to reach those who do not currently see it as relevant to their lives. This policy addresses the need for people to have places to access and enjoy a high quality natural environment. We will deliver the policy by ensuring that it is integrated across the breadth of our work under our Strategic Direction.
 - 4.1.1. Natural England believes that places where people can enjoy the natural environment should be improved and created where they are most wanted.
 - 4.1.2. Natural England believes that access to the coast should be provided on foot by right and for multi-purpose use wherever reasonable.
 - 4.1.3. Natural England believes that access to the natural environment using public rights of way and in open access areas should be increased and should include improved sustainable connections from urban places.
 - 4.1.4. Natural England believes that access to the natural environment within agri-environment schemes should be promoted, increased and encouraged.
 - 4.1.5. Natural England believes that the family of National Trails and other highest quality recreation routes should be promoted as part of a global brand.

Annex 1

Access Draft Policy

This paper presents Natural England's draft policy on access, to inform the delivery of our objective that people will have places to access and enjoy a high quality natural environment. The development of the draft policy has been informed by an informal consultation with external stakeholders between July and August 2008.

Context

Inspiring people to value and conserve the natural environment is one of the four strategic outcomes under Natural England's refreshed Strategic Direction. Providing high quality access to the natural environment is integral to delivering this outcome.

Access in this paper includes both access to the natural environment as well as the wide range of healthy and sustainable, recreational activities that people enjoy in the natural environment on land and water. It also includes motivating those people who do not currently, or only partially, enjoy any relationship with the natural environment. Our ability to inspire this latent sector of society will be a key measure of our success. We acknowledge the many high quality recreational resources that currently exist and the longstanding expertise of many land managers including the National Trust, the National Park Authorities and country parks in managing the demands of recreation, landscape conservation and socio-economic development. We want access to all existing high quality natural environments to be maintained.

Over the past 60 years, Government policy has responded to society's desire to achieve access to mountains, moors, heaths, downs and remnant common lands and to be inspired by recreational routes through our finest landscapes, nature reserves and coasts. However, social trends and changed personal behaviours have led to increased disconnection from the natural environment.

Our overall approach to access will prioritise outcomes that:

- provide the widest range of opportunities for people of all abilities, ages, ethnic groups and social circumstances to actively engage in, value and enjoy the natural environment;
- aid healthy activity;
- contribute to achieving the transition to a low carbon economy.

We will only be successful in this if our access policy is integrated across the breadth of our work.

Policies

1. Natural England believes that places where people can enjoy the natural environment should be improved and created where they are most wanted.

Policies that support the development of multi-purpose green space in urban areas and around the edges of our towns and cities will enable the greatest number of currently unengaged or disengaged people to access high quality natural environments. We will therefore continue to work with Local Authorities and

developers to deliver local, accessible green infrastructure at all scales, and to promote Government policies that support the development of multi-functional green infrastructure. We also support the work of the National Park Authorities, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Forestry Commission, British Waterways, voluntary bodies, landowners and local authority partners in applying this principle in their own operations. The creation of more accessible and inspirational natural environments as a means of overcoming the psychological barriers to engagement will be particularly important for children, the disabled and ethnic minorities. Equally important will be the need for higher quality experiences on existing facilities and the provision of better interpretation to improve the quality of intellectual access on site.

Evidence

England has a highly urbanised population with 80% of its 50 million people living in towns and cities. These areas also contain the greatest social diversity and the most acute areas of disability, disadvantage and poor health. Parts of urban England have the lowest amounts of natural environment per head of population and some of the lowest overall quality of life. As a consequence, many people do not see the natural environment as relevant to their lives and are not inspired to value and conserve it.

2. Natural England believes that access to the coast should be provided on foot by right and for multi-purpose use wherever reasonable.

The Government is seeking to improve access to the English coast and to legally determine public rights to beaches. The draft Marine Bill contains proposals to create these legislative changes and follow advice from Natural England's Board.

Evidence

England has a biologically rich, geo-diverse and outstandingly scenic coastline that, in places, has achieved World Heritage Site status. It is also a popular destination for much of our domestic tourism by millions of people every year. The attraction of the coast to both people and wildlife is well proven and substantiated by the existing number of visitors and wildlife site designations that it receives. Aligning a legal right of access through a locally determined coastal corridor, with spreading room for coastal change and enhanced coastal habitat to improve the quality of the experience, will raise the standard to that of global best practice if properly resourced and managed. Although access will be primarily provided on foot, we will be seeking local opportunities, wherever reasonable, to add facilities for the disabled, cyclists, horse-riders, canoeists and other non motorised recreational users. There should be the potential to develop public transport and non-motorised access links from population centres in the coastal hinterland and the opportunity to promote the coast.

3. Natural England believes that access to the natural environment using public rights of way and in open access areas should be increased and should include improved sustainable connections from urban places.

The provision of open access land has been a public policy success in many places but some sections of society are unaware of it or are unable to utilise it due to a range of cultural, psychological and transport barriers. These barriers begin on the doorstep in most urban places where lack of an inter-linked, high quality, natural urban greenspace resource is most acute. Some deprived communities lack the awareness, motivation and information to utilise even the places closest to them. The additional issues of poor quality, intermittent or non-existent sustainable use

routes for walking, cycling, horse-riding and canoeing out of towns and cities and a lack of public transport compounds the problem.

Rights of Way Improvement Plans and Local Access Forums will enable land managers and highway authorities to guide people to where they want to go and to improve the quality of existing facilities and develop new opportunities. The extensive public rights of way network will continue to form the linear component of access to the natural environment for many existing users but use should be increased for the widest range of people of all abilities, ages, ethnic groups and social circumstances.

Evidence

The National Open Access Onsite Visitor Survey (2007) showed that, for the majority of visits, people were using existing public paths and tracks with only 8% fully using the new right. Research also suggests that users favour open access land on which access had previously been tolerated rather than on new access land. Those visiting open access land are not representative of the general population of England as they are more likely to be older, male, retired, of a higher social grouping, white and in better health. There was little evidence for a change in behaviour from the majority of the population. Helping new users to overcome the barriers to enjoying the natural environment by outreach, information campaigns and other motivational tools will be important to maximise the use of these resources.

Evidence from surveys conducted by Sustrans on the use of the National Cycle Network (particularly its traffic-free, family friendly, art enhanced, wildlife rich, converted railways and canal towpath routes) has shown a very large increase in use. Evidence clearly points to community outreach, ranger assistance, good promotion, clear signage from the places that people inhabit, well maintained, high quality, multi-use routes will encourage and inspire even the most disadvantaged sectors of society to become new users.

4. Natural England believes that access to the natural environment within agri-environment schemes should be promoted, increased and encouraged,

Access to the natural environment is a key public good generated by the public funding put into agri-environment schemes, but, to date has been limited and variable in quality. Children and young people in particular have suffered over several decades from lack of wild play space and limited opportunities to explore marginal land as traditional mixed farming declined and contact with the agricultural community became rarer. This is now being enhanced under the improvements to the Environmental Stewardship Scheme being taken forward through Natural England's spatial targeting, which will generate the multiple outcomes for the funding that reflect the breadth of our remit. Environmental Stewardship can provide the opportunities for educational visits, learning outside the classroom, disabled access to high quality standards and recreational access to the natural environment across interesting and biodiverse landscapes close to where people live. Many opportunities to enhance access to high quality natural environments through agri-environment schemes also exist on land managed by conservation NGOs and other bodies.

Evidence

Previous targeting strategies have produced good results when applied to giving links in the rights of way network (4286 km funded) and access to isolated points or places of interest (7158 ha funded). School and group visits to the 650 sites under Environmental Stewardship have been popular. The overall impact for people living

in towns and cities has been limited because the land involved is often far beyond the reach of the majority of the population. Under the changes to Environmental Stewardship arising from the Review of Progress, there is a significant opportunity to target funding to increase access to the natural environment in high priority areas. Targeting is currently being considered at a local and thematic level working with access and disabled partner groups and stakeholders to provide enhanced access, increased user numbers and outreach to groups without high current use.

5. Natural England believes that the family of National Trails and other highest quality recreation routes should be promoted as part of a global brand.

National Trails are established in law as Long Distance Paths and have been developed over many decades since the creation of the Pennine Way inspired by Tom Stephenson's vision of a 'long green trail'. The latest National Trail, the Cotswold Way, was officially launched in 2007.

The suite of designated National Trails and the many hundreds of local and regional routes is currently under review. The evidence suggests that they have captured the public imagination and score very high levels of customer satisfaction. On any global level of best practice, most of England's National Trails would compare well.

The recreational routes in England could be pivotal in enhancing the tourism offer both to domestic tourists and day visitors but also to overseas visitors. Young people in particular could be attracted to the challenge offered by better promoted, multi-use, recreational routes and the sense of freedom, escape and wildness that they can inspire. Water based, non-motorised, recreational routes on lakes, rivers, canals or coastal waters have been poorly provided and innovation is needed to consider how to develop them.

It should be an automatic consideration that our National Trails and as many other recreational routes should begin and end at an urban centre, railway station, ferry port or a public transport interchange to maximise their visibility and relevance to people.

Evidence

The 15 National Trails have been consistently very popular with users over many years. Research carried out in England during 2004/5 showed that an estimated 12 million visits are paid to the National Trail network each year. User survey research in 2007 has shown that 98% of users were happy or very happy with their National Trail experiences. Awareness of National Trails was also high with a 91% rating. When using National Trails 92% agreed or strongly agreed that they were motivated by enjoyment of wildlife, 98% enjoyed the peace and quiet, 99% the scenery and 89% confirmed that the route was well managed.

There were 338 million journeys on the National Cycle Network in 2006 with the expectation that this would increase significantly in 2007/08 due to the success of the £50 million Connect2 lottery bid. The example of the Kirklees Greenways (voted best greenway in Europe in 2007) has shown that over a third of users describe themselves as new or novice users; 85% said the route had helped increase their levels of regular exercise and 43% of pedestrian users said that they did not have access to a car. Overall use of the traffic free greenway had increased by 23% since 2004 against the national trend of all leisure visits to the countryside which is steadily decreasing.

Globally acknowledged trails are a major tourism asset to countries that base their tourism offer on an accessible and inspirational journey through magnificent landscapes and natural wonders. For example, the South West Coast Path contributes £307 million per annum to the regional economy and many tourists are now seeking more sustainable travel, accommodation and activity experiences. Whereas the C2C (Sea to Sea) route from Whitehaven/Workington to Sunderland/Tynemouth links economically and socially disadvantaged urban and rural communities and areas of the highest landscape and wildlife designations. This route for cyclists, horse-riders and walkers has brought new sources of tourist income and has combined disused railway lines, quiet lanes and off road tracks with children inspired artworks and community cohesion.

Annex 2

Informal consultation

External stakeholders contacted and responded

Black Environment Network
British Association for Shooting and Conservation
British Horse Society
British Mountaineering Council
British Trust for Conservation Volunteers
Canoe England
Central Council for Physical Recreation
Countryside Council Wales
Campaign for National Parks
Campaign to Protect Rural England
Defence Estates
Department of Communities and Local Government
England Access Forum
England National Parks Authorities Association
Environment Agency
Forestry Commission (England)
Gloucestershire County Council
Inland Waterways Amenities Advisory Council
Lake District National Park Authority
National Association of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty
National Farmer's Union
New Forest National Park Authority
Norfolk County Council
North York Moors National Park Authority
Open Spaces Society
Oxfordshire County Council
Peterborough Local Access Forum
Professor Adrian Phillips
Professor Jules Pretty
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
Sport England
Stephanie Wheeler (British Horse Society)
Woodland Trust
Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority

Summary of responses to policies

General context

The majority of respondents strongly supported the draft policy or components of it. There were qualifications and caveats introduced by others. Some of these comments are listed below:

Generic comments

- Include more about access for the disabled
- Develop role of public transport in supporting sustainable recreation
- Add concern about quality of experiences (eg noise disturbance)
- Need to clarify what activities eg off-road driving are considered nature sensitive
- Refer to barrier removal for ethnic minorities
- Support activities that will protect and enhance the natural environment
- Describe recreational needs as undertaken at different times not as one activity
- Add value placed by public on protected areas
- Refer to the user conflict dilemma
- Add mental and physical health value of being active in green places
- Refer to the potential conflict between recreation and nature conservation
- Use education to overcome some people's fear of the outdoors
- Access barriers are psychological as well as physical
- Children should be encouraged to walk to school and have nature in school grounds
- Some rural poor see nature as a barrier to the outdoors not as a positive resource

Policy 1

- Include use of urban open space as an introduction to nature
- Link existing National Trails to urban centres
- Explain 'diversity proofing'
- Promote England's wider open spaces to escape urban pressures
- Avoid implication that remoter areas are not as important
- Acknowledge difficulty of getting developers to provide local green spaces
- Mention problems of getting long term funding for greenspace maintenance
- Mention the inspiration that the unengaged can get from our finest landscapes
- Value the recognition that the nation places on national parks
- Should encourage landowners to voluntarily register land as town or village greens
- Should press for more robust controls against disposal of open space
- Aim to address the national deficit in accessible woodland
- Address the issue of encouraging informal, unstructured play for children

Policy 2

- Coastal focus is good but don't neglect waterway access (rivers, canals, lakes)
- Mention exemplary role of National Trust
- Laudable but should not be at expense of other access initiatives
- Refer to relationship between coast and hinterland communities
- Need to avoid locations that have very sensitive wildlife habitats
- Account needs to be made of defence and military needs

Policy 3

- Open access has not been a policy success in southern England
- More focus on managing and improving existing networks
- Define sustainable connections
- Add emphasis on improving public transport links to national parks
- Refer to how black and ethnic minority communities reach national parks
- More information, interpretation and access facilities are needed
- Quality rangering is needed to inspire disadvantaged people
- Refer more to water based activities that attract people
- Many public rights of way and green spaces have been lost in growing cities
- Need for change in government funding of sustainable rural public transport
- Rural bus timetables are aimed at getting people to work not for access
- Oppose the use of gating orders to stop up public rights of way
- Register common land omitted for registration under the 1965 Act

Policy 4

- Add the value of access and recreation in building links between town & country
- Inaccessible agri-environment schemes don't provide well used facilities
- Use agri-environment schemes to help protect the Ridgeway from tractor damage
- Use policy as a means to improve understanding of how agriculture works
- Agri-environment land needs to be attractive and welcoming to people
- Access take up will be patchy unless incentives increased
- Cross-compliance should be used to keep paths open and in good order
- Extend access provisions to Entry Level Stewardship

Policy 5

- Other recreational routes should be improved to National Trail standards
- Explain absence of policy on managing (rather than promoting) national trails
- Promote via education key stages better understanding of access and recreation
- Add a strong educational element to visitor experiences
- Not all young people are attracted to challenge of recreational routes
- Repackage domestic marketing to promote day loops on National Trails
- Handle overseas promotion of National Trails carefully (in relation to low carbon use)
- Promotion of recreational paths should not be at expense of local path networks
- Most National Trails could and should be converted to multi-use