

Natural England : coastal access authority audits Briefing note for Local Access Forums

July 2008

Background

In February 2007, following a programme of fact finding work, Natural England advised Government on the best means of fulfilling its manifesto commitment to improve coastal access around the English coast. Our full advice is available on the Natural England web site at the address below;

http://www.countryside.gov.uk/LAR/Access/coastal_access/coastal_access_report.asp

After a three month consultation by Defra on the proposed options for improving coastal access, Government announced in September 2007 that it plans to legislate to create new powers under which a right to walk around the entire English coast, so far as practicable, will be established. These powers are included in the draft Marine Bill, which was published on 3rd April 2008 to allow scrutiny by MPs and Peers before it is put before Parliament.

Natural England has worked closely with Defra on the content of the draft Marine Bill. In parallel we have published our Coastal Access Outline Scheme which will guide decisions at the local level on improving and managing coastal access. It is available at:

<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/leisure/access/coastal>

Natural England is continuing to work closely with Defra on the detail of taking the new coastal access arrangements. This includes gathering more detailed information on existing access around the coast.

Access authority audits

We intend to meet with all coastal local authorities, county councils and unitary authorities, to undertake a desk based audit of current satisfactory access on foot and get an initial indication of any provisional or indicative alignments that access authorities may wish to see in place in order to 'close the gaps' in current provision. The current plan is to complete the audit by the end of March 2009.

This is the first stage in the process. It is important to stress that the provisional alignment is not anything other than **purely indicative**. It may form a focus for activity at the alignment stage but it should **not** be seen as short cutting the planned local consultation and design that is integral to our advice to government and the approach set out in our Outline Scheme. The detailed consultation work on alignment will commence around 2010.

The access authority audit approach has been trialled in Durham, Lancashire and Suffolk . The key people we involve are rights of way staff, supported by a biodiversity/conservation officer and anyone else who has detailed knowledge and understanding of the authority's coast eg if appropriate, coastal AONB officer , Heritage Coast, National Trails and National Parks staff.

At this stage we would not usually envisage Local Access Forum representatives being involved but would like LAFs to be kept informed by the access authority when an audit is planned to take place in their area.

The LGA are supportive of our approach and believe that the information gained from the audit can be used to facilitate and inform the later work of implementation once the legislation is in place. The LGA envisage that this audit work will help to make coastal access a success and reality.

The purpose of the audit is to identify on a paper map:

- Where existing access is satisfactory
- Provisional alignment of the coastal trail (based on the gaps in satisfactory access)
- Identification of any *major* infrastructure (bridges etc.) that may be required on the provisional alignment
- Identification of existing furniture on the existing coastal access
- Where there are constraints or opportunities for nature conservation and landscape enhancements

And in general for each authority

- Current management costs of existing route including staff time materials etc.

The audit will be carried out on the basis of existing data and knowledge of the coast.

The meeting

Representatives from Natural England's coastal access team will meet with up to three people from the access authority. Ideally these will be from the access team within the authority with some input from a biodiversity or conservation officer. A regional Natural England colleague will also be invited to attend.

The meeting will work along in a sequential way from edge to edge of the access authority coastline. A 1:10,000 scale map (supplied by Natural England) will be marked up in the following way;

Marking the map - the line data

A line will be drawn over the

- existing satisfactory access on existing PRoW (the walked line rather than the definitive route although comments on the coincidence with the definitive route of the PRoW would be useful)
- existing satisfactory access not on existing PRoW (a walked line through de facto access or permissive agreement)
- provisional or indicative route where no satisfactory (statutory or de-facto) access currently .

The continuity of the line will be broken by recording crossing data (gates stiles, bridges

etc.). Each item of infrastructure or crossing will be recorded. This will be recorded on the map according to a standard code, devised by Natural England.

Criteria for existing satisfactory access

Access can be considered to be satisfactory if..

- It follows in a direct and convenient way the broad lay of the coastline, without making significant and unavoidable deviations inland;
- It is passable on foot at all states of the tide;
- It crosses any estuary by a safe, permanent crossing point;
- It is normally available on all days of the year and not subject to repeated closures or deviations;
- It is not unreasonably steep, constrained in width, oppressive or dangerous, having regard to the other potential ways around that section of coast;
- It maintains continuous or near-continuous views of the sea or shoreline, accepting that there may be unavoidable interruptions to the view from coastal vegetation, landforms, coastal defence structures or developments;
- It does not follow a public road used by motor vehicles unless no other reasonable option exists;

The paper maps will subsequently be digitised by Natural England and the information gathered will be entered in to a purpose built database. The intention is to share the information gathered with access authorities at a later date as we continue to work with them in taking this stage of the process forward.

To set the access authority audit in context, Natural England will be working with our National Nature Reserve managers to look at our own estate over the next year. Organisations such as the National Trust and RSPB will be involved as landowners during the indicative alignment process at a later stage.