Item 14

Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority

30 June 2026

Public Rights of Way Annual Report 2025-26

Purpose of the report

1. To provide Members with the opportunity to comment on the Rights of Way Annual Report prior to submission to Westmorland and Furness Council (W&FC), North Yorkshire Council (NYC) and Lancashire County Council (LCC).

Recommendation

2. That the Rights of Way Annual Report be submitted to the three councils, subject to any comments from Members.

Strategic Framework

3. The information and recommendation(s) contained in this report are consistent with the Authority's statutory purposes and support the strategic planning framework:

    - **Corporate Plan objectives 7, 8, 13 and 14**

      Manage and maintain the standard of all public rights of way, so that, on average, 90% remain 'easy to use'

      Create 5 new 'miles without stiles' routes that are suitable for a diverse range of ages and abilities by 2030

      Enhance at least five 'green lanes' by 2030 and manage use by recreational motor vehicles and motorcycles - encouraging and supporting responsible use.

      Manage and promote the Pennine Way, Pennine Bridleway and Coast-to-Coast National Trails and other established long-distance routes and improve linkages from the Coast-to-Coast route to 5 nearby settlements by 2030

Background

4. The Rights of Way annual report for 2025/26 (**Appendix 1**) identifies progress made by the Authority (YDNPA) on public rights of way maintenance against our Corporate Plan actions and targets. This work is undertaken through delegation agreements on behalf of the three Highway Authorities that cover their respective areas of the National Park. As part of these agreements, we are required to submit a report to these Highway Authorities each year.

5. The Authority has previously taken on responsibility for rights of way maintenance functions on the basis that a well-managed rights of way network is considered essential for the achievement of our statutory purposes.

Ease of Use Target

‘Ease of use’ in this context is based on a nationally established performance indicator for rights of way and is defined as:

I. signposted or waymarked where the right of way leaves the metalled road and to the extent necessary to allow users to follow the path;

II. free from unlawful obstructions and other interference (including overhanging vegetation);

III. surface and lawful barriers (e.g. stiles, gates) in good repair and to a standard necessary to enable the public to use the way without undue inconvenience.

6. In simple terms, a member of the public should be able to follow a route easily and not encounter anything that detracts from the enjoyment of the route whether on foot, horse, bicycle or using a mobility scooter.

7. There is a note of caution, as the ‘ease of use’ indicator measures a 5% random sample of rights of way across the network. So, figures will fluctuate year on year. Results over several years are required to average out any sampling variation and provide a true reflection of the quality of the network.

8. The 2025 survey has resulted in a figure of 88%. This is exactly in line with the operational target for 2025/26 set in last year’s Corporate Plan. This was set to reflect the resource implications of delivering several major rights of way projects during the year, including the Coast-to-Coast Path National Trail, works at Cross Keys Bridge, and the Smardale accessible footpath. These drew some resources away from day-to-day maintenance.

9. The number of maintenance tasks completed during 2025/26 decreased by 13%, from 794 in 2024/25 to 688 in 2025/26. It is anticipated that, as these significant capital projects reach completion, resources will be redirected back towards routine maintenance activities, supporting future improvements in the ‘ease of use’ indicator over the coming years.

National Trails

10. In 2022, the Government announced that the Coast-to-Coast Path would become a new National Trail. The 194-mile path, stretching from St Bees in Cumbria to Robin Hoods Bay in the North York Moors National Park, passes through the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

11. Natural England (NE) was allocated £5.6 million of Government funding to improve the route. NE has worked alongside local partner organisations to ensure the path meets the National Trail Quality Standards and is fully open and available for public use.

12. Enhancement works on the route in the Yorkshire Dales National Park have now been completed and culminated in the official opening of the route on the 26 March 2026 at the Dales Bike Centre in Reeth.

13. Whilst the Coast-to-Coast Path has existed for many years, it had not benefited from the promotion and status of being a National Trail. Natural England and partners are continuing to look at the wider benefits of designation. This work will continue through the establishment of the Coast-to-Coast Path National Trail Partnership in 2026/27, for which the Authority will act as the lead partner.

14. The Authority also continues to act as the 'lead partner' and accountable body for the Pennine National Trails Partnership, which oversees the management and maintenance of the Pennine Way and Pennine Bridleway. During the past year, the Authority has distributed 41 grants to 12 different partner organisations, and the partnership has managed £739k of grant expenditure overall. This included a one-off grant of £340k for accessibility enhancements along both Pennine National Trails.

Volunteers

15. Volunteering opportunities to help survey and maintain public rights of way have continued throughout the year. In total 1,000 days of practical work, and 428 days of surveying, were undertaken by volunteers during the year. This equates to approximately 6.5 full time equivalent staff.

16. The surveying of all the 2,642km rights of way in the National Park is a significant achievement and helps the YDNPA plan the work required for the coming year. The survey work includes:

    - 'Ease of Use' surveys and Parish Path surveys for the entire network;
    - A visual inspection and report on each bridge;
    - Inputting all survey information into Authority's IT database.

Funding

17. We continue to seek external income to resource this work programme. During 2025/26 we were successful in bringing in £875,000 of external funding, with individual contributions and contributions 'in kind' from various sources.

Yorkshire Dales Access Forum

18. Ahead of Members receiving this annual report, the Yorkshire Dales Access Forum (YDAF) reviewed the report in its statutory advisory role and acknowledged the extensive work undertaken by staff and volunteers across the National Park.

19. The YDAF welcomed and praised the significant work undertaken at Smardale, with Members particularly pleased about the creation of an accessible route. However, Members also expressed disappointment that the route will not be dedicated as a public right of way and will instead remain a permissive footpath without higher rights.

20. The Chair of the YDAF will be writing to Cumbria Wildlife Trust, as landowners, to request background information on the current permissive status of the route —

specifically in relation to access being limited to those on foot and individuals using mobility aids.

Financial Implications

21. None.

Legal Implications

22. None. However, it is worth noting that the Authority is now entering the final year of its current financial agreement with Westmorland & Furness Council for the delivery of the delegated public rights of way duties referenced previously. Initial discussions have commenced regarding the review of the delegation agreement and a new financial agreement, with the aim of ensuring continuity of service provision.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Implications

23. The continued investment by the Authority to improve accessibility offers significant benefit to visitors and residents with disabilities and others experiencing limited mobility.

Conclusion

24. Rights of way maintenance and associated volunteering continue to make an important contribution to the work of the YDNPA and specifically National Parks' second purpose. As one of the Authority's priority programmes, our aim is to ensure this National Park has one of the best maintained rights of way networks in the country.

Alan Hulme
Head of Park Management