Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority **Item 16**

24 June 2024

Public Rights of Way Annual Report 2024-25

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. 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 Objective 7:**
      Benefit a wide variety of users by raising the standard of all public rights of way so that 90% are 'easy to use' by 2023

Background

4. Recent discussions with the Unitary Councils have highlighted the fact that the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority undertakes maintenance of public rights of way at no cost to local farmers or landowners. This hasn't been widely understood among the public generally, and contrasts sharply with the situation outside the National Park where such responsibilities sit with the local authority and the landowner.

5. During discussions with W&FC and NYC both have now acknowledged the works conducted by the Authority in relation to their legal responsibility for rights of way maintenance. These discussions have resulted in funding contributions of £33.4k (2024/25) rising to £43.7k (2026/27) from W&FC and £50k annually for 5 years starting 2025/26 from NYC. There are only 16km of rights of way in the Lancashire area of the National Park and to date we have not approached LCC

for a funding contribution. This would be considered if any significant works were required in the future.

6. The Rights of Way annual report for 2024/25 (Appendix), identifies progress made by the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority (YDNPA) on public rights of way maintenance against Corporate Plan actions and targets. This work is undertaken through delegation agreements to deliver these duties on behalf of the three Highway Authorities - the councils that cover the National Park. As part of the agreements, the YDNPA is required to submit a report to the councils each year.

7. The Authority has previously taken on responsibility for rights of way maintenance functions because a well-managed rights of way network is considered important for the delivery of the YDNPA's statutory purposes.

Ease of Use Target

8. The Authority's current objective for Rights of Way maintenance is based on National Park Management Plan objective B1 which states:

   'Benefit a wide variety of users by raising the standard of all public rights of way so that 90% are 'easy to use' by 2023'.

9. 'Ease of use' in this context is based on a nationally established performance indicator for rights of way. This 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.

10. 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.

11. There is a note of caution when considering this 'ease of use' indicator, as it only measures a 5% random sample of rights of way across the network, and as such figures will fluctuate year-on-year. Results over several years are required to average out any sampling variation and determine the figure which is a truer reflection of the network. The 2024-25 figure is 92% and this is higher than profiled showing the unpredictability of the survey. However, the average over the five-year period remains at 90% 'easy to use'.

National Trails

12. The Authority continues to act as the 'lead partner' and accountable body for management and administration of 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 27 grants to 11 different partner organisations, and the partnership has managed £399k of grant expenditure overall.

13. In 2022, the Government announced that the Coast to Coast route would become a new National Trail. The 197-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. National Trail status achieves the National Park Management Plan objective B2 in relation to the Coast to Coast route:

    'Maintain and promote the Pennine Trails and other recognised long-distance routes, identify opportunities for new multi-user routes, and campaign for the Coast-to-Coast path to become a National Trail by 2024'.

14. Natural England (NE) were given £5.6 million of Government funding to improve the route. NE is working alongside local partner organisations to ensure the path meets the National Trail Quality Standards and is fully open and available for public use. The YDNPA is undertaking the legal and establishment work in the National Park.

15. Enhancement works on the route in the National Park have commenced and will continue over the coming year with the upgraded path expected to be ready for opening in March 2026.

16. Whilst the Coast to Coast route has existed for many years, it has not benefited from the promotion and status of a member of the National Trial family. Natural England and partners are also looking at the wider benefits of designation, including opportunities to develop link routes and circular routes; engage with local communities and businesses; improving nature connectivity; information provision; and tourism opportunities.

Volunteers

17. Volunteering opportunities - to help survey and maintain public rights of way - continued throughout the year. In total 875 days of practical work, and 480 days of surveying, were undertaken by volunteers during the year. This equates to approximately 6.5 full time equivalent staff.

18. The surveying of all the 2637km 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:

    - Conducting both 'ease of use' surveys and Parish Path surveys for the entire network of the National Park;
    - A visual inspection and report on each bridge in the National Park;
    - Inputting all survey information into Authority's IT database.

Funding

19. We continue to seek external income to help resource this priority work programme. During 2024/25, we were successful in bringing in £1,539,838k of additional external income, with individual contributions and contributions 'in kind' from various sources. We have also been successful in discussions with NYC, securing a financial contribution towards the costs of YDNPA delivering the previously mentioned delegation agreements over a 5-year period commencing from April 2025. This is in addition to the contribution offered by W&FC in 2023/24 for a 3-year period which commenced in April 2024.

Yorkshire Dales Access Forum

20. Ahead of Members receiving this annual report, the paper has been considered by the Yorkshire Dales Access Forum (YDAF) in their role as statutory advisor to the Authority on opportunities for open-air recreation.

21. Members of the YDAF acknowledged the wealth of work conducted by Authority staff and volunteers throughout the National Park and Park Services directorate's efforts in raising external funding to aid works to ensure the network is maintained to a high standard.

Financial Implications

22. None. This is a report to external organisations.

Legal Implications

23. Issues relating to the delegation agreements we have with the three Highways Authorities were examined during the year as part of performance review which reported back to the Audit and Review Committee in November 2024.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Implications

24. None

Human Resources Implications

25. The decision on the delegation arrangement with NYC have not resulted in any HR implications.

Risk Management

26. The Authority will need to continue to manage public expectation and understanding of its role in managing the rights of way network.

Conclusion

27. The importance placed on rights of way maintenance and wider access to the countryside is often cited as one of the advantages of being in a National Park. With the lengthening of the holiday season and increasing importance placed on individual health and well-being the importance of this access continues to grow.

28. The Coast to Coast path is being implemented, after being confirmed as a National Trail. This comes with financial resources for the implementation and future maintenance, as well as for development of 'wider benefit' opportunities.

29. Rights of way maintenance and volunteering continue to make an important contribution to the delivery of Authority objectives and specifically our second statutory purpose. As a priority programme, our aim is to ensure the National Park has one of the best maintained rights of way networks in the country. This work is undertaken on behalf of the Councils, who retain the statutory responsibility.

Alan Hulme
Head of Park Management

Background Papers
Performance Review of Delegated Statutory Highway Duties, Audit and Review, 26 November 2024

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