YORKSHIRE DALES NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY **ITEM 9**

Committee: **AUDIT AND REVIEW**

Date: **14th November 2023**

Report: **LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE ACCESS FOR ALL / MILES WITHOUT STILES PROJECT 2019-2024**

Purpose of the report

1. To provide an assessment of the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority's (YDNPA) Access for All/Miles without Stiles project, and to identify lessons learnt.

RECOMMENDATION

2. That Members note the lessons learned from the Access for All/Miles without Stiles project, and agree that the recommendations in section 4 of the **Appendix** should be taken into account in developing the Authority's future approach.

Strategic Planning Framework

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

   - ***National Park Management Plan Objective B3***
     'Carry out works to improve access on appropriate public rights of way and established permissive routes, so that 262km (10%) are suitable for users of all ages and abilities by 2024'

Background

4. Reports on lessons learned from 'major projects' provide Members with an opportunity to hear from officers about what has been achieved; what worked and what didn't, and make recommendations for future project development and management across the Authority. Members agreed that 'Lessons learned from the Access for All/Miles without Stiles' project should be one of the 'major projects' for review this year.

5. The Access for All programme aims to remove barriers to access on public rights of way and in open countryside. It focusses on providing a variety of suitable routes and infrastructure, clear orientation and appropriate information to enable people to decide whether or not a public right of way or recreation opportunity is right for them. 'Miles without Stiles' is a brand, which is used to promote well-surfaced accessible routes which are free from stiles, steps or steep gradients.

Achievements

6. There have been significant improvements in the rights of way network over the project period, and a drive to improve accessibility by removing stiles and improving path surfaces where appropriate. The audit process, against an accepted set of standards ('By all reasonable means' here) has enabled the YDNPA to successfully identify some promotable Miles without Stiles routes. We are now at a point where 9.5% of the public rights of way network is suitable for users of all ages and abilities, and we promote and maintain 19 Miles without Stiles routes. Over the five-year period the Ranger Service has increased the number of gates in the network by 178, and reduced the number of ladder stiles by 68. In addition, 5.2 km of new engineered routes have been created and 12.8 km of previously engineered routes repaired. These works improve accessibility of the rights of way network, in general, throughout the National Park.

7. In addition to physical works to the rights of way network, action has been taken over the project period to improve facilities and the welcome for disabled people across the National Park. A changing place has been installed at Dales Countryside Museum Hawes, and another is currently being constructed at Grassington Visitor Centre, and there is a Tramper (an all-terrain mobility scooter) at Aysgarth Falls. All 4 National Park Visitor Centres (Hawes, Grassington, Malham, Aysgarth Falls) have accessible toilets, blue-badge parking spaces and are wheelchair accessible, and staff have received 'welcome all' and dementia awareness training.

8. External funding has been secured for capital works to improve accessibility. The Access and Engagement Team and the Ranger Service are working together to develop 'pipeline projects' for significant capital works to improve accessibility, and identifying opportunities for external funding. In development currently are projects to improve access at Cautley, Smardale/Waitby, Aysgarth Falls and as part of the Coast to Coast project.

9. Strong partnerships have developed with partners such as Access the Dales, and working together has enabled us to identify barriers to access and make improvements.

10. The YDNPA's Learning and Engagement Team regularly run activity days in the National Park for groups which include at least one disabled person. They co-create activities with disabled users, removing barriers to access, the learning from which has been effectively incorporated into policy development.

Lessons Learnt

11. In undertaking this review, relevant officers and key stakeholders including Access the Dales and Outdoor Mobility were consulted for their views.

12. Unfortunately, despite all the achievements outlined above, there is no evidence that the numbers of disabled people accessing the National Park has increased. In fact, the Yorkshire Dales National Park (YDNP) visitor survey (2022) found one in ten (10%) of respondents were in a party where a member of the party had a long-term health issue or disability that limits their daily activities. There has been no change in

this figure over the past 10 years, as shown by the 2017 and 2013 surveys, and it does not represent the national percentage of 24%.

13. The current objective, which focuses on the principle that a reasonable percentage of routes should be accessible, remains central to general maintenance and improvement of the right of way network as a whole. However, this review (**Appendix)** highlights the importance of developing and securing external funding for discrete projects to develop specific routes which meet the broader requirements of a promoted Miles without Stiles brand, and remove more than just the physical barrier to access e.g. replacing a stile with gate, but provides suitable parking at the start, accessible toilets, sensory trail etc.

Conclusion

14. The project will have achieved its objective to increase the overall accessibility of public rights of way, throughout the National Park, by making physical improvements to the route network. This has been done through effective use of the existing Rights of Way budget to make small changes that increase accessibility, as well as securing external funding for more significant capital works.

15. YDNPA has also demonstrated a more holistic commitment to accessibility over the past couple of years and have made other changes to remove/mitigate other barriers to access for disabled people which go wider than physical improvements to the network. These include securing external funding for two changing places in the National Park, more effective promotion of accessible routes, a more informed welcome, supported visits for disabled people and a Tramper at Aysgarth Falls.

16. As well as removing physical barriers on the rights of way network, the National Park should continue to be promoted as a Park for everyone, to build confidence and knowledge that disabled people can have an experience of equal quality to non-disabled people. That they can take part in recreational activities and connect with nature, and ultimately that we have removed a wide range of barriers and created an environment which enables them to enjoy, learn about, and experience health benefits of being in this special place.

Rebecca Greenfield
Head of Access and Engagement

2 November 2023

Appendix

Lesson Learned from the YDNPA's Access for All/Miles without Stiles Programme 2019-2024

THE INTENTION

Why was the project established?

1. The latest estimates from the Department for Work and Pensions' Family Resources Survey here indicate that 16.0 million people in the UK had a disability in the 2021/22 financial year. This represents 24% of the total population.

2. All visitors to, and residents of, the National Park should be able to enjoy its special qualities, no matter what their level of physical ability. It's harder for disabled people to access the National Park than non-disabled people because the barriers they face are greater.

3. We have a legal and moral responsibility to adopt policies and practices to improve accessibility and reduce discrimination, and to remove/mitigate barriers to access on our land, to enable disabled people to access the opportunities for physical recreation and connection to nature offered by the National Park. By doing so we make the National Park a welcoming place for all and give opportunity for everyone's health and wellbeing to be boosted by being here. We also extend this approach to the rights of way maintenance work we undertake through the Highway Authority Delegation Agreements, on behalf of landowners.

4. The programme of work to remove the barriers to access on public rights of way and in the open countryside is called 'Access for All'. It focusses on providing a variety of suitable routes and infrastructure, clear orientation and appropriate information to enable people decide whether or not a public right of way or recreation opportunity is suitable for them. It started in the late 1990s through the 'BT Countryside for All' programme.

5. 'Miles without Stiles' is a brand developed first by the Lake District National Park Authority and adopted across all National Park Authorities around 2010, as a way of promoting well-surfaced, accessible routes which are free from stiles, steps or steep gradients. A shared format and classification system allows people to visit any National Park and feel confident that they can use a well audited route using standards that are consistent. The routes are suitable for people with a wide range of disabilities, including wheelchair users. Families with pushchairs, young children and dog walkers can also benefit from these routes. When promoting a route as 'Miles without Stiles' consideration is also given to the availability of accessible parking, public transport, toilets, changing facilities and Tramper hire nearby.

6. Addressing Access for All issues is an integral part of our rights of way maintenance programme. Physical improvements to the rights of way network made as part of this programme are considered to be one of the success stories of the National Park, opening up access to all to some of the most iconic sites – Malham Cove, Aysgarth Falls etc.

What was the project intended to achieve?

7. The project was intended to increase the overall accessibility of the public rights of way network throughout the National Park. It was based on the 'principle' that a reasonable percentage of routes, whatever their status should be accessible.

8. It is not possible to make all areas of the National Park accessible to everyone, but by undertaking audits and understanding what currently restricts access e.g. terrain surface, gradient and/or infrastructure and removing/mitigating those restrictions, where possible, the project aimed to ensure that all visitors to the National Park could have an equal quality of experience.

9. In this work, Rangers have regard to the following guiding principles set out in the Authority's Rights of Way Maintenance Plan:

   Access for All Guiding Principles:

   - *In each area of the National Park, routes suitable for all user abilities will be identified and upgraded, (or where a need has been identified new routes will be created). Where practicable, routes that loop from villages (especially those with visitor centres, or public transport interchanges and RADAR toilets) will be provided as a matter of priority.*

   - *Wherever an existing right of way is being maintained, every opportunity to replace difficult barriers with more accessible features will be considered, e.g. replacing a ladder stile with a gap or gate. The less remote a route, the more stringently this criterion will be applied.*

   - *The creation and upgrading of Access for All routes must safeguard the historic, scenic and environmental value of the National Park.*

10. There have been 'Access for All' objectives in the last four iterations of our National Park Management Plan The current objective is to increase the network available to all users by improving a further 100km of route over the 5-year period:

    'Carry out works to improve access on appropriate public rights of way and established permissive routes, so that 262km (10%) are suitable for users of all ages and abilities by 2024.'

How would the project be delivered (who was supposed to do what?)

11. The project to improve the rights of way network for people with disabilities by removing barriers to access, has three elements:
    a. Audits of the rights of way - to understand what currently restricts access.
    b. Physical works - carried out to improve accessibility.
    c. Concentrating resources and prioritisation of routes which give the most equitable results.

12. The Access and Recreation Officer leads on accessibility work in the Authority. As part of the Access and Engagement Team their role is to:

    - Audit rights of way in the National Park and identify those which:
        - already meet the access for all standard
        - could meet the access for all standard with some improvement work and
        - could become a Miles without Stiles route.

    - Produce and distribute promotional material on Miles without Stiles routes.

    - Work with disabled users to identify where improvements might be made.

    - Organise annual audits of routes to monitor condition.

13. The Ranger Service deliver access improvements on the ground. Their role is to:

    - Plan and deliver improvement work to routes identified in the Audit to meet the Access for All standard

    - Integrate access improvements within their general rights of way maintenance to improve the accessibility of non-prioritised routes (as outlined in the Rights of Way Maintenance Plan).

14. The Access and Engagement Team and the Ranger Service would work together identify routes where more significant works could take place to achieve one of the accessibility standards and become a Miles without Stiles route.

15. The standards used for auditing and works are: By All Reasonable Means .First published in 2007 by the Countryside Agency, it has subsequently been revised by Natural Resources Wales in 2017 and Natural England in 2020. The guide is currently being revised again by Natural England. The guide provides practical support for countryside managers to improve accessibility to their sites, routes and facilities. Routes are classified using the following systems:

    - **Access for Most** (used to be all) – - hard, smooth surface with stones up to 5mm. 1.2m wide. Gradient of 1:12.
    - **Access for Many** – Hard and firm surface with stones up to 10mm. 1m wide. Gradient of 1:10.
    - **Access for some** – Path possibly modified with some larger stones, tree roots and rutting. 815mm wide. Gradient of 1:8.

    All three classifications are considered access for ‘all ages and abilities’ within this programme of activity.

How much was it supposed to cost (YDNPA staff time/funding)

16. The Access for All budget has always been small (originally £6k), and was used to pay for any materials that were outside of routine rights of way maintenance, as well

as any design or publications e.g Miles without Stiles booklets. In 2023/24 only £2k per year remains for Miles without Stiles promotion.

17. It was anticipated £100k expenditure would come from the Public Rights of Way maintenance programme budget for access improvements over the 5 years of the project, i.e £20k a year would be spent on new gates and surface improvements that increased accessibility.

18. It was anticipated that the cost for this work would be around about 20K (10K Ranger Time and Access and Recreation Officer time).

THE REALITY

What did the project actually achieve?

19. The past few years have seen a significant improvement in the rights of way network and a drive to improve accessibility by removing stiles and improving path surfaces where appropriate. Within the National Park, 9.5% of the rights of way network is suitable for users of all ages and abilities and YDNPA promotes and maintains 19 Miles without Stiles routes. The objective of 10% of the rights of way network will be reached by 2024.

20. A map of all the audited and logged Access for All routes is attached at **Annex A**. It shows the *ad hoc* nature of these routes, as many have come about through small improvements made through routine maintenance rather than being strategically planned projects.

21. In addition to physical works to the right of way network, positive action has been taken over the project period to improve facilities and the welcome for disabled people across the National Park. For example, a changing place has been installed at Dales Countryside Museum, Hawes and another is currently being constructed at Grassington by the Visitor Centre; and YDNPA has installed a Tramper at Aysgarth Falls which has been very well received, joining seven more wheelchair hubs managed by Access the Dales here.

22. All four National Park Visitor Centres (Hawes, Grassington, Malham, Aysgarth Falls) have accessible toilets, blue-badge parking spaces and are wheelchair accessible, and staff have received ‘welcome all’ and dementia awareness training.

23. Through the YDNPA’s website here and through the new YDNPA walking app 19 Miles without Stiles routes are promoted. Also the Access and Engagement team run activity days regularly, in the National Park for groups who include someone with a disability.

24. Unfortunately, despite all this, there is no evidence that the numbers of disabled people accessing the National Park has increased. In fact, The Yorkshire Dales National Park (YDNP) visitor survey (2022) found one in ten (10%) of respondents where in a party where a member of the party had a long-term health issue or disability that limits their daily activities. This is a similar figure to that recorded in the 2017 and 2013 surveys and does not represent the national proportion.

How long did it actually take?

25. The current objective will be achieved within the intended 5-year period.

How was it actually delivered?

26. The National Park Management Plan target to increase routes suitable for users of all ages and abilities to 10%, over 5 years, has been delivered as intended by:
    a. Identifying stretches of route through the Accessibility Audits which already meet the Access for All standards.
    b. Making small changes to routes to increase accessibility as part of routine rights of way maintenance work e.g. replacing stile with gates. In 2019 there were 5,748 gates (Field, Hand, Kissing Gates) in Oct 2023, there were 5,926. In 2019, there were 415 Ladder Stiles, in Oct 2023, this had reduced to 347. In addition, 5.2km of new engineered routes have been created and 12.8km of previously engineered routes repaired, to improve and increase accessibility.
    c. A small number of externally funded capital projects. Specific accessibility projects conducted during the 5-year period include the Underley Estate, Kirkby Lonsdale 470m of new surfaced path, installation of gates on the Malham to Janet's Foss Footpath and the Tebay Fell Footpath Creation.

27. There is 14km of route left to identify, most of this will be through the accessibility audit of the Coast to Coast path, later this year.

28. Since 2019, five new Miles without Stiles have been created (Clapham Nature Trail, Settle Town Trail, Sulber Nick, Stainforth and Gorbeck Road). The promotion of Miles without Stiles routes has much improved, maps and route descriptions are available on the YDNPA website and some routes have been included in the very successful YDNPA Walking App.

How much did it actually cost?

29. It was anticipated that approximately £20k per annum would be spent on general access improvements to the network. It is difficult to estimate from the rights of way budget exactly what has been spent, because it pays for materials, but the exact cost is likely to be around £100k. Over the five-year period the Ranger Service has increased the number of gates in the network by 178 and reduced the number of ladder stiles by 68, 5.2km of new engineered routes have been created and 12.8km of previously engineered routes repaired.

30. Reductions in resources within the rights of way maintenance budget, over recent years, has meant it was essential to secure additional funding and partnership approaches to achieve capital projects for access for all improvements which are beyond routine maintenance. Specific accessibility projects conducted during the 5-year period include Kirkby Lonsdale 470m of new surfaced path (6k YDNPA

capital), installation of gates on the Malham to Janet's Foss Footpath (5k Grant Funding), Tebay Fell Footpath Creation (Westmorland Dales Heritage Fund).

31. It is estimated that the cost for this work in staff time was be around about £30K per annum(10K Ranger Time and 20K Access and Recreation Officer time).

LESSONS LEARNED

What went well, and why?

Effective use of skill and resource

32. Having a trained, skilled and experienced Access and Recreation Officer to audit against an accepted set of standards enables identification of existing accessible routes and routes which could be made accessible with further enhancement. Working with the Engagement Team, they provide a rounded, people-focused approach to removing barriers to accessibility for people with a wide range of disabilities.

33. The Ranger Service has confidence built up over many years from working in this area, and used their skills effectively. Accessibility is reflected in their day to day maintenance work, taking opportunities to increase access where possible and making the most of the limited resources available. Their greatest strength is persuading landowners (legally responsible for rights of way infrastructure) to replace stiles with gates on footpaths, thereby opening up new routes.

External Funding and developing a pipeline of projects

34. Our limited resources mean external funding is necessary to improve specific routes to meet broader requirements of Miles without Stiles. Development work, such as the access improvements proposed at Cautley, have only been possible with legacies or external funding. The proposal at Cautley would never have got off the ground without a benefactor giving £50k, in direct response to accessibility improvements made by the Area Ranger in the Cumbria part of the Park.

35. Over the last few years, the Access and Engagement Team and the Ranger Service have thought more about the pipeline of projects and routes which would be ideal for development. So once the money is identified or available we have been able to react quickly, for example DEFRA's Removing Barriers Fund enabled us to purchase a Tramper for Aysgarth, open up access at Malham and improve access from the Swale Trail to the river.

Challenge Routes

36. The terrain and the undulating gradients found in the Dales has been embraced with the development of 'challenge routes' for disabled people who feel confident in the outdoors This goes some way to offering an equal quality of experience for disabled people.

Co-creation and support

37. There has been co-creation with disabled users to identify barriers to access and make improvement. The Access and Recreation Officer has an excellent relationship with Debbie North (Access the Dales), Craig Grimes (Experience Community CIC) and other users through the Access for All Advisory Group. The Learning and Engagement Team regularly co-create activities with disabled users, the learning from which is shared into policy development. (However, Debbie North - Access the Dales has commented that it would be great to have more resource dedicated to accessibility).

38. There is effective engagement work with groups including people with a disability. Groups worked with include: Access the Dales; Sheffield Visually Impaired Walking Group; Disabled Ramblers; People Matters Leeds Mencap ; Jo Cox Foundation; SELFA; Advonet LEEP1 Group; Help 4 Heroes; Mowbray School and Neurodiverse Community, Catterick , Experience Community.

What went less well, and why?

Routes for All

39. The definition of all ages and abilities is misleading. While there has been real success with 'challenge routes', there are not many routes in the National Park which are 'for all'. Using the 'By All Reasonable Means' standard current figures show that 22km of routes are for all, 31km for many and 200km for some.

40. Out of 19 Miles without Stiles routes, only five are 'for all' and they are all under two miles in length. The main limiting factors are the surface terrain, and the undulating gradients found in the National Park, as well as the fragmented nature of landownership – there are no big landowners who wish to see access improvements on their land eg Forestry Commission, National Trust though Yorkshire Water have supported improvements at Grimwith Reservoir in the past.

41. There has been a focus on wheelchair access, we want to enable more people with a wide range of disability to make use of these access improvements to improve their health and wellbeing, and to empower disabled people to make independent visits to the National Park, and to create opportunity to deepen their connection with nature through sensory experiences. As well as looking at the needs of people with mobility issues, we also want to seek to improve access to people with Autism, dementia, visual impairment and hearing impairment. Also consider that older people may not consider themselves disabled but can experience many of the same barriers because of a general reduction in stamina and mobility. Demographic changes are resulting in a greater proportion of older people in society and we know that many of our resident/visitors fall into this category.

Ad hoc nature of improvements

42. The ad hoc nature of routine maintenance works to improve access has meant whilst the target has been met, we haven't created any really good routes through this work, and few which are promotable as Miles without Stiles. Unless part of a

larger externally funded project, stiles and gates are only replaced when they come to their end of their life. In addition, the lack of connection between Audits and works on the ground means the Audits have been used primarily to identify routes that already meet the criteria, but are not yet logged.

43. It is difficult to monitor through existing systems the capital and revenue spend on accessibility enhancements across the rights of way network using the current monitoring systems. Individual larger scale projects are easy to identify and calculate capital and revenue costs.

Inclusive services

44. More could be done to ensure that inclusive practices are adopted across a full range of services e.g accessible signage, website and promoted material.

External funding and pipeline of projects

45. Despite seeking opportunities, there has been a lack of external funding to undertake significant capital works, combined with a lack of forward planning. The short timescale for DEFRA funding, highlights that we need to develop a pipeline of large projects ready to go. However, as Cautley has shown this needs 'seed' funding and can take several years to go through the design stages. Joined up working between the Access and Engagement and Ranger Teams to develop future projects such as Aysgarth, Smardale and the Coast to Coast is a positive move forward on this.

Landowner support

46. There are some fantastic opportunities in the National Park to create flagship access for all routes, but they would require landowner agreement and many are reluctant. The legal requirement is for them to maintain the infrastructure as shown on the Definitive Map, so if the legal record shows a stile, there is no legal requirement on the landowner to accept a gate. Most landowners prefer stiles as it prevents gates being left open and stock escaping.

The end result

47. Despite the amount of effort identifying and promoting routes, there is no evidence that this work has increased the actual number of disabled people visiting the National Park. Although those that do, may be having a positive experience. This needs more investigation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

48. Continue to remove/mitigate physical barriers to access for people with a wide range of disability:

    a. Continue to embed access work within the rights of way maintenance programme including:

        i. Seating/resting places (where landowner in agreement) and signage;

        ii. Offering training and support to ensure access work is not an add-on.

    b. The annual audit of miles without stiles routes should continue to ensure they remain of high standard

    c. Adopt a more strategic approach to route development – identifying what is missing and creating ambitious off the shelf projects and seek external funding, working with user groups to identify a pipeline projects that:

        i. Extend existing miles without stiles routes

        ii. Offer new routes which meet the 'for all' or 'for many' standard.

        iii. Improve accessibility on routes near the Visitor Centres.

        iv. Deliver improvements for a diverse range of physical, sensory and mental disabilities.

    d. Audit existing miles without stiles routes against the new 'By All Reasonable Means' criteria and look at the value of introducing a 4th category – a challenge route

    e. Maximise benefits offered by the new Coast to Coast path and linking routes to open access to disabled people.

49. Improve promotion of accessibility:

    a. Continue to look at how the National Park can be promoted as a Park for Everyone, to build confidence and knowledge that disabled people can: have an experience of equal quality to non-disabled people; that they can take part in recreational activities and connect with nature; and, ultimately that we have removed barriers and created an environment which enables them to enjoy, learn about, and experience health and wellbeing benefits of being in this special place. Activities could include:

        i. ensuring that website and written information is provided in accessible formats and language (e.g. Audio describe films and create easy read guides);

        ii. continuing to develop plans for a digital access hub' to provide one stop shop for information about accessibility, wayfinding, accessible facilities in the National Park

        iii. undertaking an Access Audit of the visitor centres and surrounding area and make recommendations for improvements;

b. Consider running a landowner conference to showcase the importance of improving accessibility to the recreation and health benefits offered by the National Park; focussing on how they can open up access for all and the benefits of doing so.

50. Review systems and processes:

a. Survey the Miles without Stiles routes, find out who is using them and who isn't using them and why so we have a better view of the impact of our work

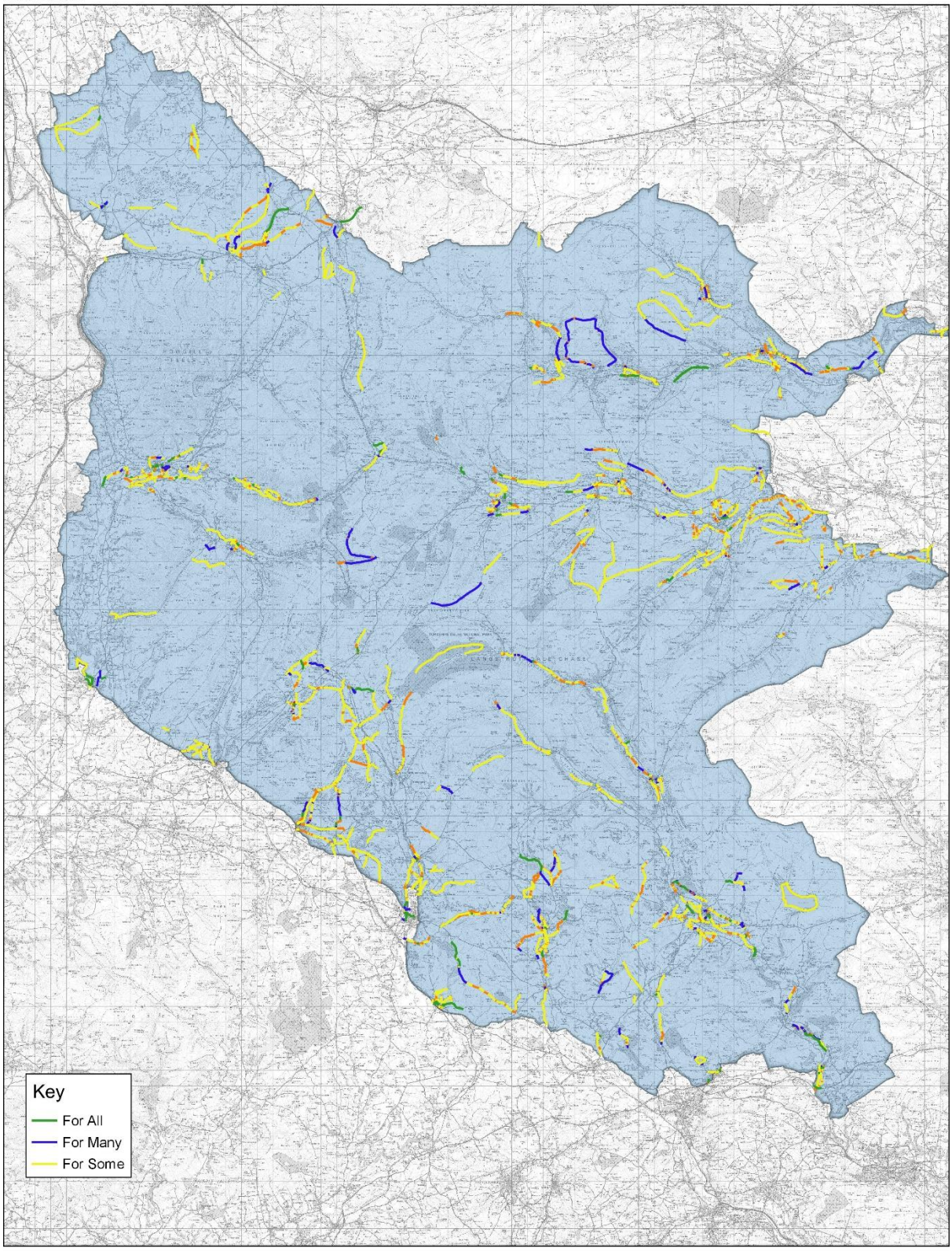
b. Review rights of way maintenance and QGIS recording system to see if general Access for All enhancements to the network that improve accessibility could be recorded alongside existing maintenance recording, so we have a better understanding of the resources being used

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Accessible routes in the YDNP

[subtitle]

Scale 210,000



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Compiled by rachelb on 5/10/2023