

**Best Value Review of Countryside Services  
Summary of Key Achievements - April 2004 to January 2005**

**1. Establishing the Service**

The staff structure for the new service was agreed in March 2004 and a new Head of Service was appointed on 1 April. £130k of additional NYCC funding was allocated to implement year one improvements. New team briefing structures were established in April and changes to job descriptions agreed in May and June. A self-assessment of the service was undertaken in July to evaluate progress made over the past year. New staff contracts were issued to existing staff between July and September. Recruitment to new posts was undertaken over the period July 2004 to January 2005 with all new staff except one in post by the end of this period. The short-term and long-term accommodation needs of the service were identified in August and alternative options are now being evaluated with the objective of bringing all elements of the service together in one location. A draft service plan has been drawn up for the wider Planning and Countryside Business Unit and 3 away-days held on various themes to help build links between staff across the service.

**2. Countryside Management**

The first of the four proposed area Countryside Officers took up post in January 2005 through a joint-funding partnership with Ryedale District Council. Agreement has also been reached with Hambleton District Council on a similar basis for a second post to be recruited during 2005/2006. This work will be expanded in 2005/2006 as resources permit.

**3. Public Rights of Way - Improvement Plan**

Substantial progress has been made with early work on the Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan. An extensive consultation exercise was undertaken between June and October to obtain public views on issues for the plan. The scope of the plan has now been extended to cover the whole of North Yorkshire including the Yorkshire Dales and North York Moors National Parks and additional technical support has been recruited to deal with this expanded task. Officer technical working groups and a joint steering group have been established to co-ordinate work on the plan. A 'Widening Access Strategy' has been agreed to address disability issues and the needs of minority groups and a set of strategic policies have been finalised for inclusion in the Local Transport Plan (LTP2) submission. A pilot project has been established with user groups in the Skipton area to help identify local needs and priorities. In summary, work on the Improvement Plan is progressing successfully, is being well received by partners and is on target

**4. Public Rights of Way - Definitive Map**

Excellent progress is also being made with updating the Definitive Map and dealing with the previous backlog of issues. A Legal Events Officer has been recruited and, since September, has already completed Omnibus Orders for three Districts, with the result that new Definitive Maps can soon be published for these areas. A procedure for prioritising the processing of Definitive Map Modification Orders (DMMOs) has been agreed with user groups as well as a system for monitoring future progress. 25 DMMO applications are expected to be processed by March 2005 (13 are already

fully determined) and a further 19 applications are currently in progress. Further achievement in this area has been constrained by a long-standing vacancy in a support post. With a full complement of staff, it is expected that in the region of 35-40 applications could be processed each year. Although below the original target of 70 DMMOs per year (which is no longer thought to be achievable or realistic), this would equate to a substantial increase in performance compared with previous years, when only one or two applications were processed each year. The new DMMO policy appears to be working well and training in archival research related to its use is being provided to user groups to help improve the quality of applications. The processing of DMMOs was considered to be one of the key areas of under performance during the Best Value Review. It is now felt that with the new DMMO policy, the new prioritisation and monitoring systems put in place, the closer working with user groups and the additional resources devoted to this area of work, a significant and sustained improvement in performance can be achieved. In addition, a dedicated Diversions Officer has been appointed and is currently processing over 70 applications. By March 2005, it is expected that 16 will have been determined and that, in a full year, depending upon demand, this might be increased to 50 (substantially above the target of 25).

## 5. Public Rights of Way - Maintenance of the network

This is another key area for the service, which was examined in some detail during the Best Value Review. Detailed progress is described in sections 6.1 to 6.17 of the Implementation Schedule (Appendix 3). The Best Value Improvement Plan includes three key targets, two of which are used by the County Council on a regular basis to monitor performance:

	Target	Performance	
ENV 2	Resolve 600 problems on the PROW network reported by the public each quarter until the backlog of public complaints is cleared.	Target	Achieved
		Q1	600 432
		Q2	1200 868
ENV2 (proposed amended wording)	Resolve 600 reported problems on the PROW network each quarter.	Target	Achieved
		Q1	600 634
		Q2	1200 1288
		Q3	1800 2013
ENV 3* LPSA	Ensure that at least 75% of paths are easy to use by 2006 (excluding NYMNP and YDNP).	Target	Achieved
		2002/2003	44%
		2003/2004	55% 48%
		2004/2005	65% 55%
Best Value Improvement Plan 6.10	Resolve 90% of reported problems on the PROW network within the timescales stipulated within the policy	52% resolved within the timescale for ploughing and cropping	

\* Contributes towards BVPI 178 which also incorporates data from NYMNP and YDNP

With regard to ENV2, at the last reporting period it was recommended that the target be amended, as its wording appeared to be giving rise to confusion and also did not reflect actual performance. A figure of '600 problems' is used (200 per month), whereas the Improvement Plan uses a figure of 250 per month. It is proposed to retain the figure of 200. ENV2 uses the phrase 'until the backlog is cleared'. This is

difficult to measure. In reality the 'backlog' will never be cleared as new reports are continually being received - indeed they are the only consistent measure we have of identifying what works needs to be done on the network. The most important measure is the number of reports that are actually dealt with each month and this number should be steadily increasing. In future it is proposed to prioritise all complaints in terms of a range of factors, including the importance of the route to the network and both new and 'old' complaints will then be dealt with in a consistent way across all four areas. Finally, ENV2 refers to problems 'reported by the public'. Using this measure means that it is not possible to include action taken in dealing with problems identified for example by staff, volunteers or apprentices. These are all increasingly important in terms of the number of problems actually resolved. Logically it would also mean that staff would not give priority to any reports other than 'public' reports, which is both inefficient and impractical. All reports, from whichever source, are logged in the CAMS database and then prioritised for action. In terms of measuring the target, therefore, achievement should in future be measured against those reports consistently recorded on the database. Taking all these points into account by using the revised wording proposed (see table above), current performance has been consistently above target.

Target ENV3 is the LPSA stretched target, which requires the service to achieve 75% 'ease of use' by 2006. Since the original base-line of 2002/2003, a steady and consistent improvement in performance has been achieved from 44% to 55% but it is clear that, despite the gains that have been made, the service is still significantly below target and a major effort is required to hit the stretched target of 75% by 2006. There is a particular problem here. Performance is assessed twice a year in May and November using a random 5% sample of the network (2.5% in each survey). This survey is very small and means that even if major improvements to the network are made, it is still possible for these to be missed by the survey when it is undertaken. It also means that in reality, the service has only until November 2005 to achieve its target as any improvements undertaken between November 2005 and March 2006 will not count towards the target. Members should also be aware of the extremely challenging nature of the target. During the last full year in which national data are available (2003/2004), only 4 County Councils nationally achieved a level of 75% ease of use (West Sussex 98%, Surrey 85.5%, Hampshire 82.% and Devon 78.2%) and most of these had substantially smaller networks to manage than North Yorkshire, the largest county in England. Despite these difficulties, every effort needs to be made to improve performance over the remaining months and a range of measures is set out in Appendix 2 which are either already in place or are being considered to help address the problem.

The Improvement Plan also includes a target which measures the number of problems resolved within specific timescales set out in adopted policies. The only policy to which this applies is the 'ploughing and cropping policy' which requires that 90% of reported problems are resolved within the stipulated timescale (37 days). Current performance during 2004 was 52%, substantially below this target, and this is an area that clearly needs to be addressed, particularly as ploughing and cropping issues contribute towards the LPSA target.

## 6.

## **7. Open Access**

The need to address the practical and management issues arising from the new provisions for access to open country introduced by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 was another key focus for the Best Value Review. In less than a year, major strides have been made and the service is now fully geared up to the introduction of the new rights in May 2005 (small areas in Craven came into effect in September 2004). An Access Management Plan has been prepared which assesses management requirements comprehensively across the County. Significant additional funding has been attracted from the Countryside Agency to implement a range of measures, including providing maps and information at strategically located access points. 40 new open access volunteers have been recruited and a training programme is underway to ensure they are fully equipped and prepared to start work in May.

## **8. Countryside Volunteer Service**

Work on recruiting and training the new open access volunteers has been assisted by the County Council's Access Officer and the new Volunteer Co-ordinator appointed in October. Since taking up his duties, the Co-ordinator has concentrated upon assessing the existing volunteer resource and developing consistent approaches to recruiting, training and equipping new recruits. Some 30-40 existing PROW volunteers have been encouraged to join the new service and an additional 15 volunteers have been recruited (in addition to the 40 new open access volunteers). As this new task force builds up, it will increasingly provide a powerful mechanism for tackling a range of countryside management tasks including, in the short term, maintenance and improvement of the PROW network.

## **9. Countryside Apprentices**

Through a partnership with the City of York Council, a total workforce of 10 countryside apprentices is now available to support the work of the Countryside Service. One team of three is directly managed by the County Council and a further seven apprentices, managed by York CC, can be called upon as required. Although there have been some significant establishment problems to overcome, these have now largely been resolved and the efforts of the two teams are being prioritised on PROW maintenance and improvement work (see Appendix 2 for further details).

## **10. Parish Caretakers**

It was decided in the first year of implementation to run a series of pilot projects with a range of partners to test alternative mechanisms for developing the programme. This had the advantage of attracting external match funding as well as a local mechanism for management until the appointment of area Countryside Officers. To date, two projects have been successfully launched in Craven (with the Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust) and Nidderdale (with the AONB Team), both employing a Parish Caretaker and jointly covering 5 Parish Councils. A further project in Selby District (with Selby Groundwork) involving an additional 5 Parish Councils is nearing completion and there are already plans for expansion in Craven during 2005. Future progress will be heavily dependent upon new funding as part of the Best Value Improvement Plan.

## **11. Rural Archaeology**

The new Rural Archaeology Service was launched jointly in July with the Countryside Service, with additional publicity being obtained in January 2005. Early work has concentrated upon building up links with key agencies, developing an events programme with other partners and supporting DEFRA on preparing for the new Environmental Stewardship Scheme due to be launched in 2005.

## **12. Ecology and Landscape**

The new Ecology Team is now well established. The appointment of an additional member of staff has made a significant difference with the demanding workload, with more time now being devoted to development control support. Selected functions have been out-sourced to the Regional Ecological Datacentre and staff are helping the Centre to develop service level agreements with District Councils and others to increase its economic viability. The SINC programme is well on track with a five year forward work programme agreed and proposals are being developed to support this with future management advice and assistance. The Biodiversity Action Plan programme is on target with 4 BAPs now completed to draft or final plan stage and work on the remaining two is underway or about to start. In the Landscape Team, the new landscape post was one of the last to be appointed in January 2005. Now that this is in place, it is expected that significant service improvements can be delivered, particularly in relation to development control support for Minerals and County Council development.

## **13. Rural Regeneration**

The Service has worked jointly with the Economic Development Unit on its research project on the New Rural Economy. Until the Countryside Service management team is fully developed (during 2005/2006), due to other more urgent priorities there has regrettably been insufficient time to devote to this area of work beyond the initiatives already being pursued by the EDU.

## **14. Promotion and education**

Although the Countryside Service has no staff or budget specifically dedicated to publicity and promotion, it is felt that significant progress has already been made with raising the profile of the service. The service launch in July 2004 was well attended and well received. Linked to the launch, a display and a range of Countryside Service publicity material in a consistent house style was developed and is now continually being added to. Badged outdoor clothing has been provided for front-line staff and press releases are issued on a regular basis to publicise key events and achievements. It is planned over the next year to develop an annual report and/or regular newsletter to promote the service to a wide audience and to report back on achievements and a dedicated staff group has been formed to co-ordinate this work.