

NATURAL ENGLAND CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

REVIEW OF TRAILS AND ROUTES

The purpose of document is to encourage our stakeholders to give us their opinions on the recommendations arising from the review of Trails and Routes.

Introduction by The Chief Executive

Hundreds of traffic-free trails and routes traverse the length and breadth of England; through cities, along valleys and across mountain tops. They provide many opportunities for people to make journeys, short or long; by foot, cycle or horse. Some people use trails and routes for just a few hours to enjoy outstanding natural environments. Others as a journey to complete gradually in stages over time. For some it can be a life-changing, long distance challenge to complete in one go.

This review is part of our work to inspire people to value and conserve the natural environment and it supports our draft access policy which is currently proceeding through its own consultation.

In April this year I wrote to highway authorities who manage National Trails, user groups and other interested organisations explaining our plans to carry out a review of all trails and routes across England. Our aim was to understand how many people use trails and routes, to find out how we can encourage greater use and to look for smarter ways of managing and promoting them.

We've spent the last few months gathering evidence, analysing data, talking and listening to a wide range of people. We have now produced recommendations and we invite you to respond to them before we decide what should be done and what our future role in relation to trails and routes will be.

Please read this consultation paper. Ask questions, take part in discussions, and think about the issues and opportunities we raise.

I look forward to receiving your views before the closing date of 6 February 2009.

Yours sincerely

Dr Helen Phillips
Chief Executive
Natural England

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Background

There are around 600 named, mainly traffic-free trails and routes for walking, cycling or horse-riding across England. All can be enjoyed over a series of days as well as for short trips and are promoted as an attraction to visitors as well as local people. Standards and quality of experience vary widely. 38% of the population have used one or more of these trails or routes in the last 12 months.

Natural England has a special relationship with 13 of these routes – the National Trails which have a reputation as the ‘flagship’ for all trails and routes. Established under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, they were selected for providing outstanding opportunities for people to enjoy extensive journeys in the finest countryside. Their creation, management and maintenance has always received a substantial contribution from Exchequer funds, through Natural England or its founding bodies.

Most other routes have been established by highway authorities and are managed as part of the rights of way network. User groups, such as the Long Distance Walkers Association, charities and enthusiasts have also developed and/or promoted routes.

Review Aims

Natural England commenced a review of trails and routes in April 2008. The aims were to identify:

- who uses trails and routes and what experiences they seek,
- ways of increasing and diversifying use,
- the differences in quality between National Trails and other routes,
- a new model for the future management and funding of National Trails.

How the Review was carried out

The review collected evidence from a wide range of sources including a representative sample of adults across England, managers of trails and routes in highway authorities, national and international experts, commercial publishers of guides and maps, and national trail officers. Other sources of data were analysed including Rights of Way Improvement Plans, National Trail business plans, Natural England grants to National Trails and existing trail user surveys and condition surveys.

The public market research was conducted by TNS Travel and Tourism and the main review was carried out by The Access Company.

A selection of stakeholders were involved in steering the review, representing highway authorities, The National Trust, VisitBritain and National Trail Officers.

Findings

Here is a summary of the evidence we found. The full findings will be available during the consultation period.

Users of routes and trails

25 million people (61% of the adult population) are aware that trails and routes exist in England. Awareness is highest with residents of rural areas, people in older age groups and the AB socio-economic groups.

16 million (38%) use these routes at least once annually. 30% use routes in their local area, 8% use routes on full day trips in other areas, and 13% use them while on holiday. Many people use them for both local and holiday use.

There are 6.5 million (15%) frequent users who use a trail or route at least once a week, and a further 9.5 million (23%) who use them less often. A further 15 million people (36%) are potential users who actively walk, cycle or ride but have little awareness of where trails and routes are but are interested in using them. This group come from all ages, income levels and backgrounds.

Trails and routes provide a range of experiences to suit everyone from the ambler who seeks just an hour or two in a high quality natural environment to the scrambler seeking a challenge for a day or more. While many local routes are mainly used for short trips by local people, the 2007 National Trail user survey revealed that 50% of National Trail users are out for a full day, with 33% of them aiming to complete the whole trail either in one trip, or over a series of days or weekend breaks.

People give different reasons for choosing where to walk, the most important reasons include attractive views and scenery, being away from traffic, feeling safe and relaxing and unwinding. Also important are a well maintained path or track, places to sit and rest, discovering somewhere new, being able to walk there from home, not costing much money and ease of parking..

Information about trails and routes

Provision of more, high quality, information on trails and routes would increase awareness and use.

The kind of information people want varies. All users want more printed and on-line information about where they can go. Local users want better maps, downloadable guides and often seek reassurance that other people will be using the route. People considering using routes while on holiday or when visiting another area need to know where they can go and what they can see, but are also interested in knowing what other users think, and to have information on accommodation and services.

Currently, most route information and promotional activity is aimed at existing users.

Users rate National Trails much higher for ease of access to information than other routes. All National Trails have a published guidebook, accommodation guide, website and the majority have published circular walks and public transport information.

The Quality of Trails and routes

The level and quality of maintenance of a route affects how many people use it. Highway authorities are committed to meeting National Trail Quality Standards. There are no agreed standards for other routes.

Improvements which are most effective in increasing use of a path include cutting vegetation, improving drainage and surfacing, improving signposting, and providing seating and resting places.

Other improvements which encourage particular groups include removing barriers and making routes more pushchair/wheelchair-friendly and providing more on-site information.

The quality of trails and routes is likely to improve in advance of the rest of the network as highway authorities concentrate their investment on them in response to

users' needs, the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act, and Rights of Way Improvement Plans. National Trails are managed to higher standards than other routes, scoring higher for quality on the ground with both highway authorities and users.

The Supply of Trails and Routes

Two thirds of highway authorities think there are enough or too many routes. 275 routes were named by authorities across England as being of strategic importance, compared to the 600 that exist. Three quarters of highway authorities named 3 or more routes in their area.

One third of highway authorities think there are too few routes. In rural areas this reflects a desire for more cycle and equestrian provision. In urban areas (71% of the authorities responding 'too few' are unitary) this reflects the need to create links from existing routes closer to where people live.

The majority of existing users, and most potential users, want more short circular routes and more routes connecting interesting places.

There are many more trails and routes than people think there are.

By their very nature, trails and routes can be remote. Many users depend on using a car to get there and back, some sections are difficult to reach by any form of transport, which is part of their appeal. Already 85% of the principal starting, stopping and access points on National Trails are accessible by public transport. There are opportunities to reduce the carbon footprint associated with the use of all trails and routes through, for example, better connections between trails and urban areas and/or priority given to public transport users.

Visitor Services

Availability of information, and the choice and quality of route, are the most important factors to the public when deciding where to go., However, the services available on, or close to the route are also important. People considering using routes in their local area are concerned about places to eat or drink and toilets. People planning longer trips of several days have extra needs including more information as they are less familiar with the area, as well as baggage handling and accommodation booking services.

The private sector is best placed to provide most services, but require sufficient numbers of users to make services viable. Commercial operators currently provide more services for National Trails than on other routes. For example 54% of National Trails have both baggage carrying and booking services; these operate on only 2% of other routes. Lower levels of use mean such services are rarely viable on other routes. Closer working with the tourism sector, more integrated promotion and awareness raising with businesses could lead to a wider range and a better quality of services

Trails and Routes Management

Past and current exchequer funding has resulted in the creation of a family of excellent National Trails which are well managed, well known, and popular with the public. National Trails stand out from other routes in every way, especially in the quality of environment, user experiences, the way they are managed and promoted and their iconic status. National Trail alignments have been selected to provide the best user experiences not the cheapest routes to maintain, and so are often located in environments such as peat areas and cliff edges where management and maintenance costs are higher than other rights of way.

Visitor spending supports local suppliers and services as well as contributing to

exchequer funding through VAT, fuel duty and excise duty, in the same way as does visitor spending in AONB's, National Parks and popular National Nature Reserves.

National Trails are seen as a national asset, set apart in quality and status from the rest of the rights of way network. Because most of them cross local authority boundaries there is a need for national co-ordination and leadership to ensure their continuing management.

National Trails cost on average around 20 pence per user – comparable figures are not available for the majority of other routes as very few authorities collect data on levels of use, user satisfaction or cost.

However, there is currently little strategic direction for the management and promotion of National Trails. There is inconsistency in what is supported, and no guidance on where national priorities lie. There is no central marketing or promotion, or clear guidance on regional or local promotion, and no national coordination of other key roles.

There is no national direction for management and promotion of the wider family of routes either.

Natural England's grant system for National Trails causes inefficiencies due to short-term funding, late grant allocations and a lack of ability to forward-plan resulting in missed opportunities to attract external funding.

Review Recommendations

There are seven recommendations.

1. The Best Trails and Routes. Define a new category of high quality recreational routes that are of lower quality than National Trails but higher than most rights of way. Set standards for their creation and management. Implement an accreditation process to identify them. This could be achieved through a high profile public-led campaign using feedback from users as well as technical input from highway authorities and user groups.

Outcomes: The public will know what standards to expect from routes. Highway Authorities will be encouraged to sustain the quality of the newly recognised routes and may be motivated to invest in other routes with the potential for national recognition. The consistency and quality of routes will improve, leading to improved user confidence and increased levels of use.

2. Visitor Information. Develop a new dynamic website providing easy access to information on all the best trails and routes in England. This would offer downloadable maps and guides, information on circular routes, opportunities to share experiences through personal reviews, recommendations, blogs and photographs. It could be possible for people to generate personal itineraries. A built-in problem reporting system would automatically alert route managers. It could evolve into a top quality, nationally and internationally recognised information source, which supports existing local and regional sources. It could be related to the current National Trails web-site or be a separate entity.

Outcomes: Meeting the identified needs of the public for better information will result in increased awareness and use. This offers a simple way to promote the best trails and routes identified in recommendation 1. Issues raised by users will be responded

to more rapidly, raising awareness of user concerns amongst authorities and managers.

3. Management Information. Establish a national toolkit of methodologies for collecting and sharing evidence of levels of use, user satisfaction, costs and economic impact for trails and routes.

Outcomes: Managers will have evidence to demonstrate the value of routes, helping them bid for external funds. There will be a national bank of evidence on walking, cycling and riding. Authorities will be able to respond for requests for new routes with greater understanding of potential use and demand.

4. Natural England Grants. Modernise Natural England's grant system to provide funding packages covering several years, enabling partners to plan ahead and make better long term decisions, including leveraging more external funding and getting better value from contractors. Grants to be aligned to activities in the New Management Model, see 7 below. Prioritise the current National Trail Quality Standards to ensure that grants reflect what users want and are closely linked to agreed outcomes.

Outcomes: Better long term planning, allowing National Trails to work up major improvements within existing budget levels.

5. Volunteering. Support the recruitment and support of more volunteers to assist with the management and promotion of trails and routes. Encourage trail staff to seek and encourage volunteer input. Identify barriers to increased participation and share good practice. Work more closely with established groups such as Friends of groups for specific trails.

Outcomes: Increased engagement with trails and routes, more people actively participating in monitoring, maintenance and promotion of routes.

6. Trails and Routes Staff. Re-assess the role of Natural England funded Trail Officers. Develop a more flexible approach including a wider sharing of skills and more team working. Introduce more strategic management to the development of new ideas. Increase opportunities for all staff working on trails and routes to share experience and improve their effectiveness.

Outcomes: By matching expertise to tasks within the team, and sharing experience nationally, efficiency is increased. Higher quality decisions are taken by all trail and route staff based on better evidence and knowledge.

7. A New Management Model for National Trails. Introduce a 'progression model' (see below) to focus resources on management activities relevant to each stage in the life of individual National Trails. When a trail is in its early years priority is given to raising awareness of the trail and developing effective maintenance and management systems. When mature, with all systems in place, day to day management requires less effort, and emphasis can turn to 'adding value' within the corridor of land around of the trail. This could deliver environmental improvements, better access to communities and places of interest, improved integration, joint promotion with other routes and attractions as well as stronger links to centres of population.

Outcomes: A more structured progressive management providing a better focus for development and funding which in turn will provide better access to places of

interest and settlements, more environmental improvements, wider promotion leading to greater and more diverse use.

Proposed New Management Model for National Trails

The purpose of this model is to identify changes in the priorities for managing National Trails as they evolve and to help Natural England focus its resources where it can add most value.

Construction	Early Years	Maturity	Adding Value
There is a plan and resources to construct a trail	The trail is open, signed and promoted	The trail is consistently managed to a high standard	The trail corridor improves, other trails are promoted
Priorities			More strategic role
Creating the product Delivery partnerships Management agreements Practical Improvements Launch	Improving the trail quality Marketing plans Maintenance and monitoring systems	Maintenance systems in place Most improvements completed Information delivery in place Audits and monitoring	Corridor & environmental improvements Stronger links to urban centres through public transport and physical connections with other routes Promotion of other routes Enhanced volunteer networks Visitor services Regional partnerships with tourism Test bed for Innovative projects

Consultation Questions

We want to hear your views. We are particularly interested in the extent to which you support the seven recommendations and how you could get involved in implementing them.

Please respond by answering the consultation questions below.

Natural England is holding a series of regional and national events during November,

December and January where stakeholders will be invited to challenge the findings and discuss any aspect of the review.

We are also willing to talk to organisations individually. If you would like to discuss how your organisation may wish to engage in the review, or you have any questions, please contact the Review Project Manager (peter.ashcroft@naturalengland.org.uk).

Q1. The Best Trails and Routes

The findings of the review suggest that national standards should be set for routes other than National Trails.

- a. How useful do you think highway authorities would find this?

Very Useful/ Quite useful/ Not useful

Make any comments to explain your answer here ...

- b. How useful do you think the public, both users and potential users, would find this?

Very useful/Quite useful / Not useful

Make any comments to explain your answer here ...

- c. If national standards were set, what criteria do you think should be used to help define the 'best' routes?

	Priority		
	High	medium	low
The route is :			
Promoted and managed by the local authority			
Way marked throughout its length			
Promoted on dedicated webpage/leaflets			
Maintained to a high standard			
Stile free			
Available to all users (multi-use)			
Managed by a dedicated trail officer (ft or pt)			
The route :			
Passes through landscapes of high scenic quality			

Passes places of interest			
Passes places to eat or drink			
Starts and finishes in urban settlements			
Has main access points served by public transport			
Others, please specify			

Make any comments to explain your answers here ...

d. Should the public be involved in selecting the best routes?

Yes / No

e. Is Natural England the right organisation to lead on this?

Yes / No

f. Who else should be involved?

Make any comments to explain your answers here ...

Q2. Visitor Information

The findings suggest that information about the best trails and routes in England should be available in one place.

a. Do you think this would be useful to highway authorities?

Very useful

quite useful

not useful

b. Do you think this would be useful to the public, existing users and other groups?

Very useful quite useful not useful

Make any comments to explain your answers here ...

c. It is likely that this central source of information will be on-line. Which of the following features do you think would be useful to customers?

	Priority		
	High	medium	Low
Detailed maps showing where the trails and routes are			
Birds eye views of routes (eg Google earth)			
Free downloadable route maps/directions			
Reviews from other users			
Audio route guides			
Ability to design personal itineraries			
Maps/directions for short circular walks from trails and routes			
Place to leave comments/complaints			
Pictures of trails and routes			
Public transport information			
Information on places to eat or drink			
Information on guided walks & events			
Information on accommodation			
Information on cycle hire			
Others – please say which			

d. Please indicate how your organisation would be willing to contribute to a central source of information:

Contribution	yes	No	Possibly
Data			
Funding			
Staff time			
Volunteer time			
Other			

- e. What roles do you think the private sector could have in either managing or sponsoring such an information source?

Contribution	yes	No	Possibly
Hosting			
Funding			
Staff time			
Data collection/sharing time			
Sponsorship			

Make any comments to explain your answers here ...

Q3. Management Information

The review found that little data is collected on how routes, other than National Trails, are managed and used, or on their financial costs and benefits.

- a. How useful would you find national advice on how to collect and share such data?

Very useful useful not very useful

- b. What information would you like access to nationally consistent data on, and what could you use this data for?

Q4. Natural England Grants for National Trails

The review found that the current grant system for National Trails leads to inefficiencies and missed funding opportunities.

- a. If your authority currently receives a grant from Natural England for the management of a National Trail please tell us if you think changes to the system could be made to improve effectiveness and value.

Yes – it could be greatly improved

Yes – but it could be a bit better

No – there is no need, the system works fine

- b. If some aspects of spending could be scheduled over several years would this increase efficiency?

A great increase

a slight increase

no difference

Please give examples of potential increased efficiencies here

- c. What other changes could be made to improve the current system ?

Q5. Volunteering

The review found that volunteers are actively involved in the management and monitoring of some routes and trails.

- a. Do opportunities exist to engage more effectively with volunteers on trails in your area?

Many opportunities

Few opportunities

No opportunities

- b. What do you think are the main volunteering opportunities

	High	Medium	Low
Wardening and reporting problems			
Practical volunteering tasks in organised groups			
Lengthsmen involved in maintenance work			
Working with the public, eg guided walks and talks			

- c. What do you think is required to encourage more people to volunteer their time and expertise to contribute to the management and promotion of trails and routes?

Q6. Trails and Routes Staff

The review found that the expertise held within National Trail teams and local authority staff is not being shared. Natural England is keen to ensure that expertise is shared between all people managing routes.

- a. Do you agree with this finding?

Yes / no

- b. Do you have ideas on how to improving sharing of knowledge and expertise between professionals?

Q7. A New Management Model for National Trails

This question is aimed at highway authorities who currently contribute to the management and funding of National Trails

- a. As individual National Trails reach maturity there are more opportunities to work with health, education, agriculture and other sectors to improve the delivery of appropriate local and national targets. This could help attract more funding. Would you be willing to work to increase funding both from local authorities and elsewhere to provide a better customer focussed product?

Yes

Maybe

no

- b. What else could be done to encourage highway authorities and other organisations to contribute a larger share of the costs of managing and promoting National Trails?

- c. Which aspects of the current spending on national trails provide the best opportunities for gaining better value/reducing costs

	High	Medium	Low	Please say why
Trail Staff				
Support Costs				
Trail maintenance				
Trail improvements				
Marketing				

Please make any comments to support your answers here

- d. The review findings suggest that there are opportunities to improve trail corridors through new ways of working with stakeholders. Examples include development and promotion of link routes, circular walks, and improved environmental quality through better targeting of agri-environment schemes.

Do you agree with this finding?

Yes In part No

Please make any comments to explain your answer here

Thank you for your time

Please email your response to peter.ashcroft@naturalengland.org.uk

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The closing date is 6 February 2009