

DEVON COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS FORUM

A brief guide

What is the Devon Countryside Access Forum?

Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW Act) each highway authority is required to establish a local access forum to give independent advice on public access to land for the purposes of open-air recreation and enjoyment. The Devon Countryside Access Forum, established in spring 2003, covers the whole of Devon, with the exception of the National Parks and unitary authorities, and is financially supported by Devon County Council.

Who is on the Devon Countryside Access Forum?

The Forum has fifteen members with wide-ranging experience and interests; two Councillors and thirteen members of the public, recruited and appointed by Devon County Council following open advertising. Members represent landowners and managers; users of access land (such as walkers, horse-riders and cyclists) and other interests, for example tourism, conservation, disability issues and law. Members are expected to engage in debate and seek consensus wherever possible. Those on the Forum give their time on a voluntary basis but mileage and other expenses are paid.

What is the role of the Devon Countryside Access Forum?

The role of the Forum is to provide independent advice on a wide range of issues relating to recreational and functional access in both rural and urban areas. Its remit is to advise the Council and other specified bodies; district, borough, town and parish councils, the Secretary of State for any Government Department, Natural England, the Forestry Commission, English Heritage, Sport England and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty Conservation Boards. Its main purpose is to advise on how to make the countryside more accessible and enjoyable for recreation whilst at the same time addressing environmental, social and economic interests.

The Forum is primarily concerned with:-

- The Rights of Way Improvement Plan
- Management of Public Rights of Way
- Improving recreation and access provision
- Implementation of access land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and coastal access under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.

The Rights of Way Improvement Plan

The Rights of Way Improvement Plan was published by Devon County Council in 2005 and the Forum provided advice on aspects of the Plan. It will continue to advise on strategic aspects of the Plan, funding and priorities. In addition, it may comment on the following:-

- the opportunities provided by local rights of way for exercise and open-air recreation and enjoyment of the surrounding landscape;
- the accessibility of local rights of way to blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems;
- the extent to which public rights of way meet present and likely future needs of the public;
- new opportunities to access the countryside, particularly linear routes.

Access Land

The Forum will continue to be consulted on:-

- byelaws made by the local highway authority which affect access land;
- the appointment of any wardens for access land;
- directions to restrict or exclude access from access land for greater than six months;
- disseminating information and advising on how the public should be made aware of access opportunities and restrictions.

In addition the Forum will be fully involved in the consultation process for implementing coastal access and designating spreading room under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.

Other areas of advice

These may cover:-

- providing advice on wider plans and strategies for landscape, recreation, transport, health, tourism and information, particularly the Local Development Framework documents being prepared by district and borough councils;
- commenting on the co-ordination of resources to enable integrated recreation and access;
- considering the extent to which fair provision is made for current and potential users;
- responding to national consultation documents affecting access which may be produced by Defra, Natural England or other organisations.

What does the Forum take account of when it makes its comments?

The Forum, in providing advice, has to take account of:-

- land management needs
- conservation requirements
- landscape value and public enjoyment
- social, economic and educational interests
- statutory guidance

Its comments are made within the context of the CRow Act.

When does it meet?

The Forum usually holds public meetings three or four times a year. In addition, a training day and occasional working group meetings are held for members. For example, during the last year working groups covered areas such as coastal access, the Forestry Commission public estate, the Sustrans regional plan and Devon's recreational route network.

How do I find out about the Devon Countryside Access Forum?

The Forum has its own website, regularly updated to include agendas, minutes and other reports. It includes links to other relevant sites. The website is www.devon.gov.uk/devon_countryside_access_forum.htm

Useful website addresses

Guidance given by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for Local Access Forums, updated in 2009, provides detailed information on the full scope of LAF activities and organisation. There is also a LAF reference Handbook.

<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/rural/countryside/crow/local-access-forums.htm>

The Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2007

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2007/uksi_20070268_en.pdf

Rights of Way Improvement Plans. Statutory Guidance to Local Highway Authorities in England and other information.

<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/rural/documents/countryside/prow/rowip.pdf>