



The Access & Engagement Strategy for Natural England

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Introduction

1 In July 2011, Natural England put in place a change programme to establish greater clarity about its access and engagement roles and its business model for delivering those roles. The agreed objectives of this change programme were to develop:

- a coherent strategy;
- a viable delivery model; and
- an accompanying narrative

for Natural England's roles in public access and engaging people with the natural environment.

Background and context

- 2 In Natural England's reorganisation which took effect in April 2011, our access and engagement work were brought together in a single function. This organisational change acknowledged the importance of these areas of work, but also highlighted the lack of an overarching strategy - both for our existing delivery programme, much of which had been inherited from founding bodies, and for determining future priorities.
- 3 There have also recently been several important changes in Government policy, which have changed the context and have a significant bearing on all our future work, including our strategy for access and engagement. These include:
- policies relating to the roles of Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) like Natural England in relation to those of civil society;
 - the Government's overarching policies for public service delivery as set out in the Open Public Services White Paper with core themes including localism / decentralisation; and
 - policies for the natural environment, set out in the Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP) and the England Biodiversity Strategy (EBS), and underpinned by the ground-breaking UK National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA).

In addition to these new policy directions is the need to make savings across the public sector, as part of the response to the current global financial crisis.

The basis for our strategy

- 4 Our access and engagement strategy is a strategy for Natural England as a whole, not just for part of the organisation, or for a single function. It looks beyond the short term, and has been written with a timescale of 2020 in mind. It will set the context for the implementation of related change programmes addressing, for example, National Nature Reserves (NNRs), National Trails, and working with and through civil society, as well as relevant parts of the EBS action plan. It clearly needs to be rooted in a combination of:
- our general purpose (see Annex A);
 - our statutory duties (see Annex B);
 - current Government policy, including specific asks of us via NEWP (see Annex C);
 - the views, expectations and aspirations of our key partners, customers and stakeholders (see Annex D); and
 - our Access and Engagement Evidence Summary, which underpins our knowledge base in these areas.

It also needs to be consistent with Natural England's overall Delivery Framework, which is currently being reviewed and, in particular (but not only), with the Outcome 2 section of that framework.

Definitions and scope

- 5 For the purposes of this strategy, 'access' encompasses open-air recreation and covers facilities such as paths, open spaces, access land, designated and managed sites such as Local Nature Reserves and Country Parks, and local greenspace, as well as information about, and promotion of, access opportunities.
- 6 Enjoyment of the natural environment is one of the benefits that flows from people having access opportunities. It is one of the objectives specifically included within our general purpose, and is a public good in its own right, so it requires no further justification.
- 7 But enjoyment is not the same thing as engagement. Engagement (see paragraph 8 below) sometimes follows on from enjoyment, but this progression is by no means automatic and cannot be relied on as the core of our engagement strategy. So, for the purposes of this strategy, enjoyment of the natural environment will be treated as a subset of access, and engagement will have a deeper meaning and will be treated separately.
- 8 For the purposes of this strategy, 'engagement' means more than simply contact with, or enjoyment of, the natural environment ; it also involves understanding and a sense of personal value, ownership, empowerment and, ideally, commitment to safeguarding the natural environment and the services it provides us with.
- 9 There are several reasons why bodies like Natural England should seek to engage people in their work. As with any public body, there are basic expectations on us to engage with those who benefit from, pay for, or are affected by our work and the services we provide. In respect of our particular area of business (the natural environment in its broadest sense), there is sometimes a potential mismatch between national targets and policy objectives on the one hand and local communities' aspirations for their areas – so we need to engage in order to explain and reconcile any differences of this sort. But there is also additional long-term value in securing the engagement of people with the natural environment more broadly, and helping to engender a sense of its relevance to them; this type of engagement, whose value will accrue both to people and to the natural environment, is the focus of this strategy.
- 10 Democratic participation is a fundamental element of engagement, as the term is used in NEWP and elsewhere, and will be equally important for Natural England's own engagement with civil society. But, for the purposes of this strategy, engagement applies to individuals as well as communities of interest and locality; so, while democratic participation is included within our definition of engagement , it is not a prerequisite for the purpose of this strategy.

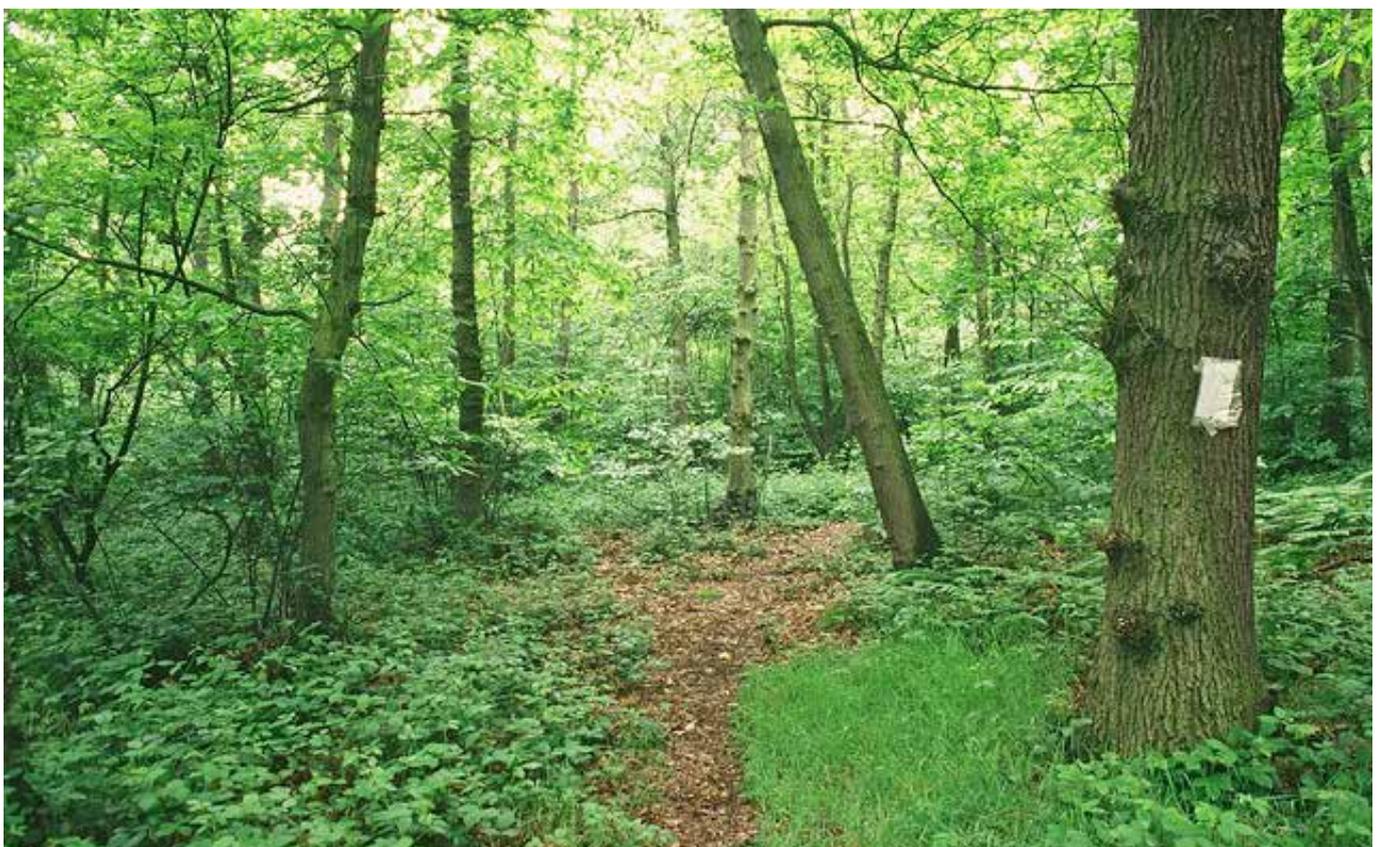
History, current position and challenges and opportunities

Access: History

11 The last 30 years have seen greatly increased awareness of the importance of access facilities and opportunities to enjoy the natural environment. Significant sums of public money have been invested by national and local government (and, in some cases, lottery funders) in, for example:

- improving the rights of way network (identified by one of our predecessor bodies as the single most important means by which people can gain access to, and enjoy, the countryside);
- making our National Trails sustainable and high quality routes through our finest landscapes;
- implementing the access rights introduced through the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act;
- providing high quality access to publicly owned woodland for walkers, cyclists and horse riders;
- developing Country Parks;
- making NNRs more accessible and attractive to visitors; and
- supporting the creation of local greenspace (e.g. Millennium Greens, Doorstep Greens), often in some of the most deprived areas of the country.

Oxleas Woodlands SSSI, London



Current position

12 As a result of this investment, the quality and availability of access facilities – at least for people on foot – is probably as good as it's ever been in modern times across most of the country. There are some exceptions, though – particularly large urban centres, where there are significant gaps in provision, and where some existing provision is poor quality.

13 Despite an ever-increasing range of home-based entertainment opportunities, visiting the natural environment remains hugely popular. Natural England, together with Defra and the Forestry Commission, has collected detailed information on people's use and enjoyment of the natural environment, focusing on visits to the outdoors. During the last two years, we have done this through the national Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) survey. The results from the 2010/11 survey show that:



Pheasey Health Walkers on Barr Beacon, West Midlands

- the English adult population participated in an estimated 2.49 billion visits to the natural environment during 2010/11;
 - 39% of the English adult population visited the natural environment during the previous seven days;
 - 53% of visits to the natural environment took place in the countryside, 37% in green spaces in towns and cities, with the remaining 11% taken at the coast;
 - 66% of visits took place within two miles of home, highlighting the importance of accessible greenspace close to where people live (see also para 27 below); and
 - an estimated £17 billion was spent during visits to the natural environment in 2010/11.
- 14 Exercising dogs, personal health and exercise, relaxing and unwinding, enjoying fresh air and pleasant weather and enjoying scenery were the most frequently cited reasons for visiting the natural environment. 'Learning something about the outdoors' was only cited as a reason for 2% of visits. However, in response to a question about outcomes from their visit, responses were much more positive, with 10% **strongly agreeing** and 26% **agreeing** that they had actually learned something new about the natural world. In addition, 25% **strongly agreed** that they felt close to nature, while a further 50% **agreed**.
- 15 Moreover, no less than 47% **strongly agreed** (and a further 50% agreed) with the statement 'I enjoyed it'. So, although there are various reasons why people visit – e.g. for the routine dog walk, lunchtime stroll, etc – overwhelmingly people report that they **enjoy** having contact with the natural environment.

Challenges and opportunities

- 16 In the current economic climate, there is an obvious risk that access facilities will be neglected, allowed to fall into disrepair and, in some cases, become inaccessible. And we know from the experience of our predecessor bodies in the 1980s how difficult and expensive it is to recover from years of neglect. So there is an important task for the access sector to ensure as far as possible that the assets underpinning access to the natural environment are safeguarded and the investment of recent decades protected. There is a need to identify funding sources, including from the next Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE), which can be used to protect and enhance access facilities for the benefit of both local communities and visitors.
- 17 Although access facilities for walkers are now good in many places, there is still much more to be done – as NEWP acknowledges – in terms of access to greenspace close to where people live. And, often, the most deprived areas and those communities whose members tend not to recognise the relevance of the natural environment to their lives are where opportunities to access greenspace – or, sometimes, the quality and awareness of accessible local greenspace – are poorest.
- 18 The new greenspace designation (announced in NEWP) will add to the plethora of other local designations (including Country Parks and Local Nature Reserves), which are currently not well focussed on their end users and may need clarification and simplification to make them more useful to local communities to help them secure a better environment.
- 19 There remains work to be done to make existing access on foot available to as wide a range of people as possible – eg. replacing unnecessary obstacles such as difficult stiles with more accessible gates.
- 20 Communities of interest such as equestrian users and cyclists are also much less well provided for than walkers. The rights of way network available to riders and cyclists is much less comprehensive than the footpath network, and only a relatively small proportion of access land is available to them. Although they generally have good access provision within Forestry Commission woodlands, continuing increases in traffic volume have made many minor roads less suitable for recreational use, particularly for the inexperienced. In addition, the fencing of commons where there are horse riding rights has caused difficulties for some riders, particularly those with a physical limitation, so we need to look again at the design of any necessary grazing schemes on such commons, including their associated fencing and gates, to ensure that access for all is effectively integrated with conservation management.
- 21 Legal processes for creating and recording access rights remain complicated and potentially confusing, so communities will need information, advice and support to enable them to bring about the improvements they wish to see in their areas. This will also apply in respect of other formal engagement processes, such as through the planning system.
- 22 There is a continuing need to bring national stakeholder organisations together to solve problems and find better ways of doing things. The recent Stakeholder Working Group on unrecorded public rights of way – which produced a package of recommendations now being taken forward by the Government – is an excellent recent example of this. Natural England commissioned that working group, but our approach was an enabling one: we created a framework within which stakeholders could negotiate a package of mutually acceptable solutions, rather than trying to impose and seek endorsement of our own views.

23 Other issues that might benefit from a similar approach include:

- finding a more cost-effective way of reviewing CROW access rights than the current decadal review model – including looking again at downland and moorland edge and, more broadly, considering whether there are effective ways of delivering area-wide access rights at a landscape scale, rather than through the current process of parcel-by-parcel mapping; and
- generating agreement about the best ways of improving off-road access opportunities for equestrian users and cyclists, in ways which complement access for walkers and the conservation management of land (e.g. by making better use of the powerful and flexible dedication provisions within the CROW Act).

Engagement: History

- 24 Our definition of engagement for the purpose of this strategy is set out at paragraph 8 above. On that basis, there has not been as clear a programme of development as with access – to some extent engagement has been seen as an automatic consequence of investment in access.
- 25 Previous engagement initiatives have tended to be one-off, time-limited projects, developed in response to the temporary availability of funding, or for a specific purpose, but they have normally not been followed through to make a long-term difference or to put in place permanent arrangements to engage people.

Current position

- 26 Few people would question the relevance – to themselves or their families – of, say, the economy, or the education system, or the NHS; but the relevance of a healthy and sustainably managed natural environment, and the risk to our well-being if that environment continues to be degraded, are nowhere near as well established or clearly understood.
- 27 As part of the 2010/11 MENE survey, respondents were presented with a series of statements designed to elicit their general attitudes to the environment and its relative importance in their lives, using a five-point scale from “agree strongly” to “disagree strongly”; the percentage of respondents who agreed strongly with each of the statements was as follows:
- “Having open green spaces close to where I live is important” – 49%
 - “There are many natural places I may never visit but I am glad they exist” – 42%
 - “Spending time out of doors (including my own garden) is an important part of my life” – 41%
 - “I am concerned about damage to the natural environment” – 34%

Although there was a high level of agreement with all the statements (the “agree strongly” and “agree” responses together totalled well over 80% for each statement), it is interesting that the final statement elicited by some way the lowest level of strong agreement. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the frequency with which people said they visited the natural environment over the previous 12 months had a bearing on responses: 37% of those who claim to visit at least once a week agreed strongly they were concerned, while just over a quarter (27%) of those who visit less than once a month or never agreed strongly with the statement.



Walkers at Ruislip Woods SSSI, London

Challenges and opportunities

- 28 Engaging people with the natural environment is one of the big challenges of our time, and is fundamental to the ultimate achievement of the Government's sustainability objectives, including those set out in e.g. NEWP and EBS. It is also fundamental to the achievement of Natural England's overarching general purpose, i.e. *to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development.*
- 29 This is a challenge for the environmental sector as a whole – NGOs as well as Defra and its agencies. In order to be effective, it will be necessary for the work – and language – of all these bodies to be complementary and mutually reinforcing. And, so far, the sector as a whole has not engaged or communicated effectively enough. Investments in engagement have been fractured, unfocused and potentially competing – with little sense of cohesive purpose underlying the range of public sector actions (at either national or local levels).
- 30 The concept – if not yet the language – of the benefits to society from ecosystem services appears to offer the best opportunity so far to engage people with the natural environment in a consistent and meaningful way.
- 31 It follows that engagement needs to be an integral part of all environmental delivery (ours and other bodies'), now and for the foreseeable future. To think that engagement can be achieved through one-off, time limited, projects and programmes designed for that purpose, is to miss the point. Time-limited engagement projects will only be worth undertaking if they are designed to test or demonstrate effective ways of working, with the clear intention of following through on these for the long term (although often not in the form of direct delivery by Natural England); the current *Natural Connections* and *Big Wildlife Garden* initiatives are good examples of this. In a rather different way, so was the *Walking for Health Initiative*, which played a significant role in helping to establish the natural environment within mainstream thinking as an important resource for preventative healthcare.

Natural England's role

Our generic role

32 Natural England's generic role, across both access and engagement, will be:

- i. to champion and lead both access and engagement nationally, providing a focal point for the environmental sector in respect of these areas of activity;
- ii. to provide both policy and technical advice to government, supporting them in their development and implementation of national policy;
- iii. to translate broad government policy into strategic direction and standards for the wider sector;
- iv. to co-ordinate, disseminate and publicise the underlying evidence base;
- v. to work in partnership with stakeholders at an appropriate scale – often some form of landscape scale – to support communities in their efforts to integrate access and engagement with wider environmental, social and economic interests, including the business sector; and
- vi. to undertake time-limited experiments and pilots in areas where we do not have a long term role, but where there is potential to make a significant long term difference in terms of public engagement with the natural environment.

Our access role

33 Our more specific role in respect of access will be:

- i. to deliver our statutory duties in respect of open and coastal access, working cost-effectively and as consensually as possible;
- ii. to advise Government in its development of more detailed policy with regard to access in its widest sense (as defined at para 5 above);
- iii. to maintain strategic leadership for England's National Trails, ensuring that the quality of both the resource and the user experience is sustained, while supporting a more devolved and locally responsive delivery model;
- iv. to establish and maintain effective mechanisms for supporting communities of both locality and interest – including in particular, but not limited to, Local Access Forums (LAFs) – to identify and meet their own priorities for safeguarding, improving and promoting the access opportunities that matter to them;
- v. to work with stakeholders to seek agreed ways of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of access provision and management; and

- vi. to deliver specific operational improvements to access provision through improved integration of access outcomes with the wider work of Natural England – ensuring that, for example, our management of our own NNR estate and our advice on proposals affecting Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and European conservation sites reflect this commitment.
- 34 We will work closely with other Defra network bodies and, in particular, the Forestry Commission and Environment Agency, to ensure that our activities are mutually complementary – and, more specifically, we will work with the Environment Agency and the successor to British Waterways to ensure that water-based access does not fall between organisational stools, although we do not necessarily expect to take a lead in this area. We will also work with and through Local Authorities whenever it is most effective to do so.

Our engagement role

- 35 Our specific role in respect of engagement will be:
 - i. to treat engagement as a long-term and integral part of all our delivery, rather than as a separate, discrete or time-limited activity; to this end, we will seek appropriate opportunities – i.e. opportunities tailored to the nature and scale of each delivery activity – to engage people in all our outward-facing work;
 - ii. to use our NNR estate as an opportunity to engage people across the breadth of our activity and to demonstrate an integrated approach to delivery;
 - iii. to take the lead on behalf of the Defra network in co-ordinating a more cohesive delivery approach to public sector investment in engagement with the natural environment – developing and maintaining a shared model, language and overall strategy, all based on the model of ecosystem services as endorsed in NEWP; and
 - iv. to reflect that strategy in our own delivery work.
- 36 Although we will not limit our engagement to any particular sector or sectors of society, engaging with local communities about work affecting their localities, engaging more generally with schools and families, and offering opportunities for volunteering will always be among our highest priorities.
- 37 To the extent that we focus on engaging hard to reach sectors of society, it will be with the aim of developing, and then sharing more widely, techniques for engaging those sectors, rather than taking on a long-term delivery role which we are unlikely to have the resources to see through.
- 38 We will work with partner organisations to ensure that our engagement activities complement, rather than compete with, theirs.

Our Unique Selling Proposition (USP)

39 During our workshop with partners and stakeholders on 20 September 2011 (see Annex D), we were challenged to be clear what our USP is, and where we add value. We perceive our USP to be based on:

- the environmental sector's existing perception of us as the national champion for access to, and engagement with, the natural environment;
- our remit as an integrated agency and statutory adviser, with research and experimental powers, which puts us in a unique position to integrate, co-ordinate and, where necessary, bring people together to find solutions to problems that need fixing or to identify new opportunities; and
- our ability to fulfil the role of a national regulator impartially, objectively and transparently (as we have demonstrated through our implementation of the CROW Act restrictions system and the Fire Severity Index).

Our USP is therefore to be the national champion for access to, and engagement with, the natural environment, innovator of integrated solutions and impartial national regulator.

Our delivery models for access and engagement

40 The key strands of our refreshed delivery models will be:

- a) **Evidence capability:** We will reframe our investment in evidence in access and engagement, taking a lead role on behalf of the Defra network and the environmental sector, setting our evidence priorities and leading their delivery. This will require a focused access and engagement evidence capability across Natural England and partners. Our evidence priorities are likely to include:
 - monitoring the availability, state and (through MENE) use by people of access facilities;
 - assessing and demonstrating economic value;
 - collating and sharing good practice from around the country; and
 - assessing people's values, attitudes and behaviours in respect of the natural environment.
- b) **Stakeholder engagement capability:** We will establish a refreshed suite of mechanisms for engaging with stakeholders at a national and local level, clearly setting out the nature – and, where necessary, the limitations – of the Natural England offer to each key group.
- c) **Advice capability:** We will move capacity from direct delivery into the development of support toolkits comprising evidence, legal information, and web-based advice – supplemented by hands-on support in some priority areas where resources are available. As part of this, we will also need to provide information about the national framework of legislation and policy, within which local decisions will need to fit.
- d) **Direct delivery capability:** We will retain a reduced direct delivery capacity, for those access duties where direct delivery is required by statute or for reasons of maintaining a nationally consistent approach, and for the management of our own NNR estate.

Organisational implications

Access and Engagement function

- 41 Within the Access and Engagement function, there will need to be:
- an increasing emphasis on identifying strategic challenges and working with others to develop sustainable solutions;
 - an increasing emphasis on provision of advice, information and guidance, both within Natural England (to other functions) and externally in the form of advice to central and local government and others, and information and guidance to civil society;
 - a clear focus on making best use of our NNR estate to engage people across the breadth of our work; this will include using NNRs to engage people in citizen science and to help develop their skills in, for example, biological recording;
 - a more limited emphasis on direct delivery of access; and
 - closer collaboration with staff of other functions (including Land Use, Land Management, Landscape & Biodiversity and Marine) to secure integrated delivery at local level.

Other Natural England functions

- 42 Each delivery function will need to assess – with guidance from A&E function staff to the extent necessary – how best they can integrate engagement into their delivery activities, and where the priorities for that engagement should lie. This will need to be done in parallel with developing plans to work with and through civil society (which is a separate but related programme being run from within A&E function.) Engaging people and working with and through civil society are not the same thing, but they overlap significantly, and working with civil society will not be possible unless some people within any given community of interest or locality are engaged.
- 43 There will be a need to provide a larger proportion of our staff with the skills and confidence they need to engage effectively, and this will be an important task for the Organisational Development function to co-ordinate.

Integrating access with nature and landscape conservation

- 44 Better integrating access across all our delivery should also be a high priority for Natural England. The benefits of integration include:
- facilitating multiple use of land, which is essential in a small, crowded country like England;
 - internalising the resolution of conflict, which is essential both within Natural England and between Natural England and its partner agencies; and
 - enabling Natural England to “walk the talk” as the integrated agency envisaged by our founding legislation.

While we have made progress towards it, the concept of an integrated agency has not yet been fully realised. Too many decisions are still made with a silo mentality – particularly in respect of casework relating to European conservation sites and SSSIs, where too many of



Exmoor ponies on Skipworth Common NNR, North Yorkshire

our staff still see access as just another threat to site-based conservation objectives. Through our work under CROW (there is a high degree of overlap between CROW access land and both SSSIs and European conservation sites) and the related “Best of Both Worlds” initiative, we have techniques and case studies which show how win/win solutions can be achieved in the vast majority of cases.

- 45 We need to share this information and experience more widely, both across the organisation and outside it. **Internally, we need to encourage – and, where necessary, require – our staff to start from a presumption that win/win solutions will be achievable in most cases, and that an important part of their job is to find them.** This is an issue of culture as well as skills and knowledge and, while there is an important role for OD here, the requirement needs to be articulated and reinforced from the top of the organisation.
- 46 We also need to ensure that access considerations are fully integrated into our engagement with the mechanisms that govern land use change, such as spatial planning, planning casework and regeneration schemes, all of which are particularly relevant to greenspace provision.

Spatial targeting

- 47 The importance of engaging people where they are has implications for our spatial prioritisation work. There is generally not a good match between the location of our most important nature conservation sites and where the majority of people live, and we will need to consider carefully how best to strike the necessary balance in our spatial targeting. In considering spatial targeting, we will need to look at access and engagement separately. Access needs to be spatially targeted on the ground, whereas engagement needs to be prioritised and targeted differentially, depending on the activity on which we are seeking to engage people. And engagement can also include intellectual engagement as well as physical engagement.
- 48 The approach set out in this strategy also has important implications for our work on National Character Areas (NCAs). NCA assessments will need to give significant attention to access facilities, and their relationship to the wider character of the area, in order to fulfil their potential as part of our evidence base to support communities.

The minimum requirements

- 49 Given the broad scope of our general purpose, the question of what is the least that we are obliged to do in this area is an interesting one. In legal terms, the answer would appear to be:
- properly fulfil our specific statutory duties in respect of open and coastal access;
 - meet or renegotiate our contractual obligations for National Trails; and
 - demonstrate that we are making a reasonable response in all the circumstances (current Government policy, available resources, etc) in deciding whether or how to exercise our powers in view of each of the elements of our general purpose.

The first two of these, should we fail to do them, could readily leave us open to legal challenge, whereas it would probably be very difficult to bring a successful legal challenge against us on the third ground – i.e. to demonstrate that what we were doing was unreasonable (in a legal sense) in all the circumstances, so that might be more relevant as a reputational issue.

- 50 In reputational terms, we might also add:

- walk the talk as an integrated agency, in terms of the advice we provide in relation to SSSIs and European sites, the way we manage our own NNR estate and, above all, the way we make engaging people with the natural environment an integral part of everything we do; and
- continue to champion National Trails and secure the quality of the product for the future.

Possible further developments

- 51 The above model sets out some core propositions. There are other related areas where Government and stakeholders may wish us to explore our role. These include:
- **tourism**, where we could help the industry to promote the English countryside and the access opportunities it offers, as a stronger element of the UK's international tourism offer;
 - **health and wellbeing**, where greenspace and green infrastructure are now accepted as important components of healthy living; and
 - **education**, where there is a strong and widespread view within the environmental sector that long-term success depends on engaging much more fully with schools and children (the Natural Connections commitment within NEWP is welcome, but will only scratch the surface).
- 52 In all these cases, there is scope for us to sit down with representatives of the relevant sector (ideally with Defra) and say, in effect, "We have these resources (i.e. access facilities, National Trails, NNRs, and our other delivery programmes) to bring to the table; what can we do to help you?"
- 53 And, of course, the engagement model proposed in this strategy can be scaled up as far as resources will allow.

Annex A: Our general purpose

Our general purpose, as set out in s2(1) of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, is to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development. s2(2) specifies that our general purpose includes the following:

- promoting nature conservation and protecting biodiversity;
- conserving and enhancing the landscape;
- securing the provision and improvement of facilities for the study, understanding and enjoyment of the natural environment;
- promoting access to the countryside and open spaces and encouraging open-air recreation; and
- contributing in other ways to social and economic well-being through management of the natural environment.

s2(3) provides that the purpose specified in the last of these bullet points may, in particular, be carried out by working with local communities.

Annex B: Our statutory duties

1 We have specific statutory duties under the following legislation:

- the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (the 1949 Act);
- the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (the 2000 Act); and
- the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 (the 2009 Act).

2 Under the 1949 Act, our duty is:

- to publish the Countryside Code (the scope of which was extended to cover open country and coastal access, through the 2000 and 2009 Acts respectively).

We also have a specific power (rather than a duty) to propose National Trails, together with associated duties relating to the manner in which we exercise that power. Where we propose a National Trail, we have to include in our report to the Secretary of State:

- a map of the proposed route including the nature and existence of public rights of way;
- our proposals for maintenance; and
- an estimate of likely capital outlay, annual maintenance cost, and annual local authority expenditure on ferries, accommodation, meals and refreshments (where these are proposed),

and before submitting it we have to consult every National Park Authority, joint planning board, county council and county district council through whose Park or area the proposed route would pass. Once a trail is approved, we have an implied duty to propose variation orders where they prove necessary going forward.

In addition, the Coastal Access Duty in the 2009 Act is in effect a duty to propose one or more national trails around the whole coast of England, and there are various subordinate duties under the associated legislation that flow from that core one.

3 Under the 2000 Act, our duties are:

- to determine applications to restrict or exclude access to land mapped under the Act;
- to make directions proactively where necessary to restrict access to land mapped under the Act for reasons of public safety, fire risk, nature conservation and heritage protection;
- to carry out periodic reviews of long term access restrictions to land mapped under the Act, to ensure that restrictions remain necessary and that the arrangements in place represent the least restrictive options;
- to display current restrictions under the Act on a website; and
- to carry out periodic reviews of the existing conclusive maps of open country and registered common land.

Note: the first three of these duties are devolved to National Park Authorities for the areas they cover, and to the Forestry Commission in the case of dedicated woodland. The fourth duty is a requirement under regulations rather than statute.

4 Under the 2009 Act, our duties are:

- to implement a walking route around the open coast of England, together with associated spreading room en route; and
- (once coastal access rights go live on stretches approved by the Secretary of State) to process any restrictions casework.

Annex C: Specific asks of us under Government policy

1 There are three very specific commitments relating to access and engagement within NEWP that already fall directly to Natural England to deliver or to contribute to their delivery:

- Natural Connections (supported by Natural England) will provide an online 'one stop shop' and direct support and advice for teachers, children and parents interested in learning outdoors. Thousands of local volunteers will be recruited to help schools.
- The Government will continue to support Open Farm Sunday and fund educational visits by schoolchildren up to the age of 16 and provide farm visits for vulnerable groups of people. (Educational visits to farms are funded under the Environmental Stewardship scheme, managed by Natural England.)
- The Government will introduce the right of public access along a 30 km stretch of the English coast at Weymouth in time for Olympics and introduce it on a further 150 km of coast by 2015.

2 But there are many other NEWP commitments which are highly relevant to our access and engagement role, such as:

- The Government will consult later this year on proposals for a new Green Areas Designation that will give local people an opportunity to protect green spaces that have significant importance to their local communities and aim to introduce the Designation by April 2012.
 - The Government will consult on simplifying and streamlining the processes for recording and making changes to public rights of way, based on proposals made by Natural England's working group on unrecorded rights of way.
- 3 Indeed, the whole concept of reconnecting people and nature (Chapter 4 of NEWP) is directly relevant to our engagement role. And engaging people is an integral element of major initiatives elsewhere in NEWP, such as Local Nature Partnerships and Nature Improvement Areas.

Annex D: The views of our partners, customers and stakeholders

Introduction

- 1 We held a workshop on 20 September 2011, at which we sought advice from a wide range of our partners and stakeholders, including some of those representing our customers, about where they thought we should focus our effort and resources. The advice they gave us is summarised below and reflected in this strategy. We made a commitment to go back to that group in early 2012, to share our emerging thinking and discuss implementation partnerships.

Headline messages

- 2 Important role for us in championing and leading both access and engagement nationally, and providing a focal point for the sector
- 3 Important to work in partnership with stakeholders at an appropriate scale to engage communities and integrate access and engagement with wider environmental, social and economic interests.

How we should champion and lead

- 4 Widespread agreement that on most A&E fronts we should shift from direct delivery to suggesting strategic direction and standards (to give people confidence to pick up and run with themes and opportunities relevant to them), and enabling and facilitating communities (of both locality and interest) to identify and meet their own priorities for safeguarding and improving access opportunities
- 5 Importance (to Government in particular) of engaging business sector, and demonstrating economic relevance of our work; implications here for our evidence role.
- 6 Valuable role in bringing people together to solve problems, e.g. Stakeholder Working Group on unrecorded ROW.

- 7 Innovate with the sector, test with the sector, enable sector to take forward proven solutions.
- 8 Make the best use of the evidence and data we have – focus new evidence gathering on complementing what others collect, and work to join up the data we and others hold to make it more accessible and useable out there.

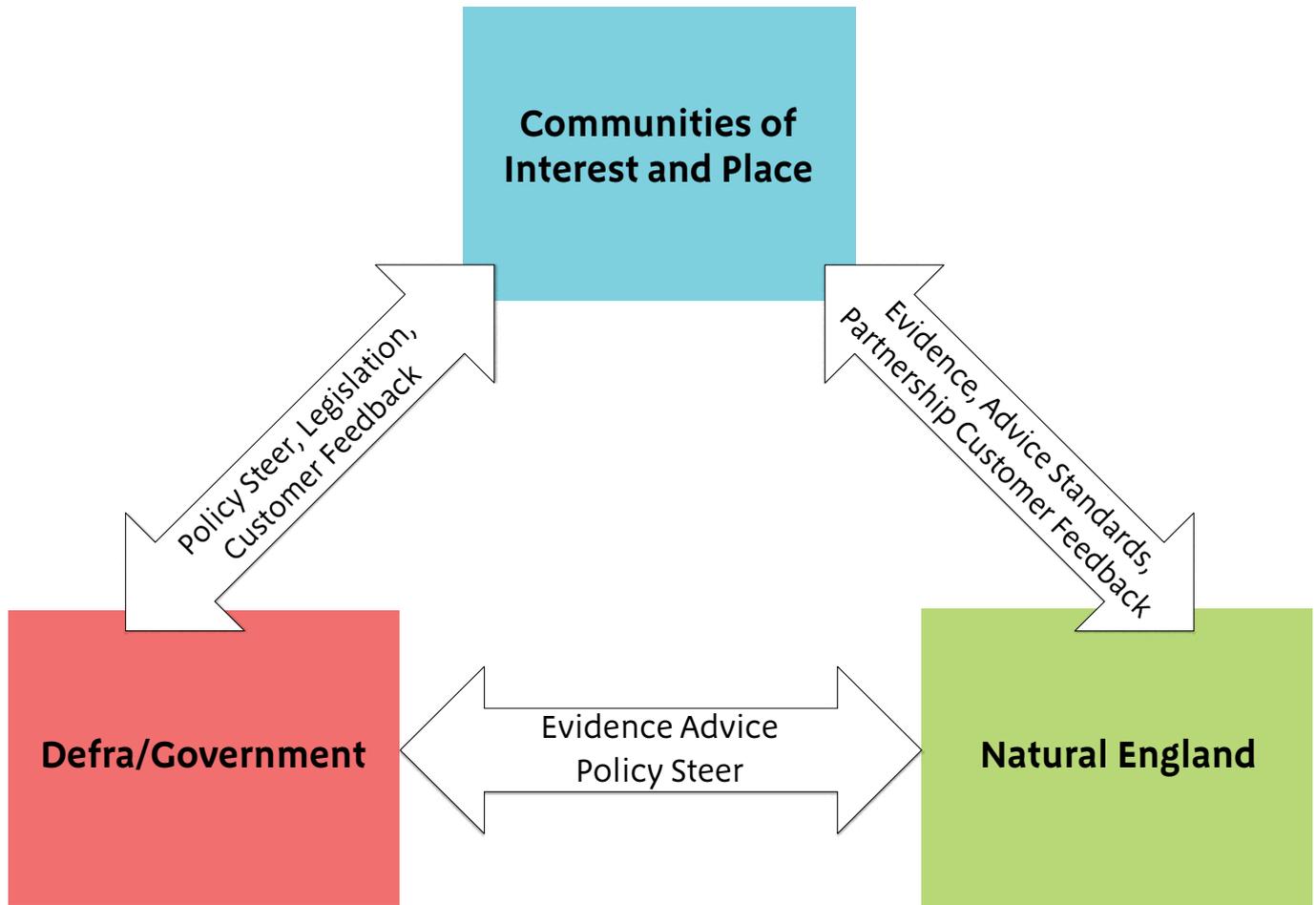
How we should work in partnership

- 9 Importance of integrating access with nature and landscape conservation – we’ve come quite a long way, but more to do. And of “putting communities at the heart of what you do, rather than trying to use them as a cheap way to get things done.”
- 10 Widespread agreement that engagement should be an integral part of all our work, but lots of possible definitions of engagement.
- 11 Importance of engaging people where they are, hence importance of green infrastructure, urban greenspace and countryside around towns.
- 12 Explore opportunities to provide applied advice on cases or to put secondees into strategically important slots for a period, to provide the difference that makes things happen on the ground. For example it was mentioned that some NFU members wouldn’t mind continuing access that agri-environment funds used to pay for, perhaps through permanent dedication, but lack advice to enable them to weigh up the options properly. There is probably a similar issue with bodies like the Woodland Trust, and the National Trust in relation to their tenanted land.

Other key observations

- 13 Continuing importance of our statutory duties in respect of open and coastal access (underplayed in proposition). The Defra representative noted that Government will want to see us doing these as cost-effectively and consensually as possible. (Presumably similar message here for National Trails, although not stated.)
- 14 Acceptance that safeguarding the current access resource more widely is an issue in hard economic times, but doubts about extent to which it’s achievable and how much of it should be our job anyway. Agreed role for us, though, in relation to evidence and sharing good practice.
- 15 But we’ll also need to ensure that nationally important environmental assets are properly protected and managed – there are likely to be instances where local interests and the wider public interest don’t coincide, and we’ll need to champion the wider public interest.
- 16 View that proposition overplayed NNRs. Yes, of course we should make the most of our own estate to demonstrate our role as an integrated agency, but they’re a small part of the big picture.
- 17 Keep it simple; be clear what our USP is, where we add value and that what we’re setting out to do is realistic and achievable in the current circumstances.
- 18 The Defra representative noted that the kind of media advocacy that Government don’t want us to do is only a small subset of our championing role.

The space that Natural England should occupy



Don't do everything everywhere; don't do everything the same – enabling and facilitating localised appropriate delivery

USP: strong evidence role on behalf of the sector – fleshing out in standards, monitoring and knowledge transfer

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