

Introduction

In County Durham, we are continuing to invest in an innovative project which helps identify our priority paths for improvement. The project's main aim is to see how future planning can help to best improve the local access network for the benefit of existing and future residents. The methodology we have created produces a sound evidence based list of priorities for improvement and can help secure funding and strategically manage the access network.

The Access Prioritisation project has succeeded at securing funding and delivering improvements to the access and rights of way network. The reports, action plans and shapefiles produced have proved useful for providing information on priority paths for improvement for developers, planners and policy makers.

We have completed 3 phases and studies in 7 areas of the County so far and are looking at how we can roll out the project further.

Background

The County Durham Local Access Forum (CDLAF) came up with the original idea for the project as an action in the first Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) for County Durham 2007-2011. The project developed through work with Durham County Council and Natural England and we commissioned JPC and Leisure and the Environment (LandE), who later became Ethos Environmental Planning, to pilot the project as major housing growth and regeneration initiatives emerged throughout the County.

The Project

Phase 1 2009/10: Spennymoor and Peterlee

The pilot (Phase 1) focussed on two planned Housing Growth Point (HGP) areas; Peterlee and Spennymoor. The project's main aim was to develop a methodology which could be replicated across the County for assessing the access network in targeted areas in order to produce prioritised action plans for improvements. The study areas were based on 2km buffers around the HGP allocations. The main focus was on Public Rights of Way but we also considered permissive routes, potential links, and the physical relationships between all the above and other spaces that local people can use and enjoy.

Study Method

We developed and trialled a method for evaluating the Access Network in relation to a variety of considerations that an overseeing Project Steering Group felt to be important. In essence, the method embraced:

- **Field studies** – using a predefined 'field sheet'. A simple scoring system was devised to record the quality of features such as surfacing, stiles, estimated levels of use. The scoring system also covered the estimated potential for a given route to improve with investment.
- **Site surveys** – via questionnaires allowed some basic people profiling.
- **Stakeholder consultation** – face to face meetings or phone calls with path users, resource managers, local councils and relevant agencies and representative organisations.
- **Desk-top work** - desk research and analysis, to draw together the themes and findings from both the fieldwork and consultation. This part of the project made considerable use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS).
- Working with the **Project Steering Group** – consisted of main partners (Durham County Council, Natural England, Local Access Forum and consultants). The Steering Group suggested the relative 'weighting' to be attached to the various features the study was seeking to evaluate

and score through the analysis and project managed the studies.

Phase 2 2010/11: Durham and Seaham

For Phase 2, the indications were that Housing Growth Points (HGP) were falling off the agenda but to maintain a targeted approach we still used the HGP sites and 2km buffer in Spennymoor. We also trialled a “city boundary” study area in Durham City. We used the methodology tested in Phase 1 but allocated more time to monitoring users (profiling/counting), on-site surveys and set up a feedback system through onsite flyers and information online to invite comments through a webpage. We spent less time on stakeholder consultation by organising grouping consultees together in meetings and workshops.

Phase 3 2015/16: Bishop Auckland, Newton Aycliffe and Shildon

We have now delivered Phase 3 of the project in 3 towns within the Local Sustainable Transport Fund area. We have included the non-prow network in the assessments and further developed the monitoring/profiling element of the project. The priority paths for improvement have been identified and works will be carried out in site in the coming year (2016/17).

Outcomes

- We have secured funds from the Local Transport Plan and have delivered 12 path improvements schemes in 4 of the study areas: Spennymoor, Peterlee, Durham City and Seaham and for works to be undertaken in Phase 3. Totals approx £295,000 from: LTP (approx £250,000), Limestone Landscapes (£40,000 HLF) and Durham Woodland Project (£4,700 HLF).
- We secured funding for audits over 3 years: £27,000 for Phase 1 for the study (£17,000 from Natural England, £10,000 from HGP), £29,500 for Phase 2 (from DCC’s Transport Asset Management Programme fund) and £50,000 for Phase 3 from LSTF.
- For path priority improvements for 2016/17 we have secured £50,000 of Local Transport Plan Funding.
- In May 2010 the CDLAF hosted the launch event of the pilot project and in Nov 2015 they also hosted the launch of Phase 3.
- The project has had an influential role and has been referenced in other plans and strategies, including the County Council’s Rights of Way Improvement Plan and Local Transport Plan 3 and has been used to inform the County Durham Plan and associated Infrastructure Delivery Plan.
- The studies have also been passed to developers and planners as part of the planning for upcoming residential and business developments. It is intended that Section 106 agreements and the Community Infrastructure Levy will help to fund path improvements where appropriate.
- The project has continued to challenge us to consider the network in a non-biased and pre-determined way. This can be difficult to accept as access managers but nevertheless reflects the modern day demands which the ROWIP seeks to deliver on.
- Full and summary reports and action plans are available for Phases 1, 2 & 3, as well as site and GIS data, consultation results and workshop reports.

Conclusion

Access prioritisation can help access managers create sound evidence based prioritised action plans for path improvements, help to secure funding and strategically manage the access network.

The studies require investment to be effective so funding is critical, but it is just as important as the delivery work to improve paths. The methodology is proven to work and has fulfilled the aims of the project in County Durham.

For more information contact Victoria Lloyd-Gent, Sustainable Travel Officer, Durham County Council
victoria.lloyd-gent@durham.gov.uk.