



# A family of unique trails

Natural England discussion paper on future management of National Trails from April 2013

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NATIONAL TRAILS 

  
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# 1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 National Trails are a family of the nation's favourite journeys which offer extensive walking, riding and cycling opportunities to enjoy and appreciate our finest landscapes. They bring societal benefits, not just in terms of public enjoyment but also in contributing to local economies and tourism.
- 1.2 The government wants to see more devolved and locally responsive solutions to public service provision, so we want to ensure that our National Trails deliver the optimum benefits for local communities and users while also achieving the best value for taxpayers.
- 1.3 Stakeholders in the National Trails include both central and local government, the people who use them, local businesses and the communities through which they pass.
- 1.4 In this discussion paper, we put forward a core proposition: central government continues to invest in Trail maintenance across England while local delivery is more clearly devolved to Trail Partnerships.
- 1.5 To achieve this, we will need to make changes to the way that National Trails are managed and funded. We propose:
  - A new framework for setting and measuring quality standards;
  - Overhaul of our grant system – we want to see one grant offer per trail, provided as a single sum and with indicative funding for three years;
  - Greater autonomy for Trail Partnerships in how they achieve a well maintained Trail, including how funds are managed and distributed; and,
  - More involvement of users in Trail management – enabling users to have a stronger say and be involved in monitoring the quality of provision.
- 1.6 The proposals described in this paper have been developed through a detailed review of current arrangements and detailed discussion with partners and stakeholders.
- 1.7 Natural England expects to publish its response to this consultation in the autumn of 2012.
- 1.8 We welcome views on these proposals, particularly from those involved in the management and funding of Trails, and look forward to receiving your responses.

## 2 Purpose of this consultation

- 2.1 During 2011 Natural England carried out a systematic review of the management of England's National Trails which involved discussions with those most closely involved in Trail management. We now wish to consult on our proposals for revising the management framework for England's National Trails as set out in this discussion paper.
- 2.2 The consultation focuses on the management regime for the National Trails; it is not concerned with their general purpose, which remains unaltered.
- 2.3 The paper outlines a series of proposals on which we would like views from those who use the Trails or are involved in their management, as well as others who may be affected.
- 2.4 This consultation complies with the general principles of the Government's Code of Practice on Consultation 2008 - <http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/better-regulation/consultation-guidance>
- 2.5 If you would like any further information about this consultation please contact: Rachel.Cook@naturalengland.org.uk. Telephone: 07778304455

## 3 How to respond

- 3.1 The consultation will run for eight weeks from the 10th May until midnight on 5th July 2012.

We would ask partners use the online survey to provide your formal response to the questions in the Discussion Paper. The online survey can be found with the Discussion Paper on Natural England's website. Please evidence your responses, where possible. However, if you are unable to use the online form, we can accept responses by emailing: [Nationaltrails.feedback@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:Nationaltrails.feedback@naturalengland.org.uk).

# 4 Introduction

## What are National Trails?

- 4.1 National Trails are a family of the highest quality public routes for extensive off road journeys connecting our finest landscapes. All of the Trails can be completed on foot and several can also be used by horse riders and cyclists.
- 4.2 National Trails are the gold standard for public access to the countryside. The routes are:
- Extensive – between them the thirteen Trails in England provide a total of 3520 km (2,187 miles) of path;
  - Predominantly off-road, utilising public rights of way (therefore free at the point of use); and
  - Cared for and managed by over 50 local highway authorities through a wide range of Trail Partnerships.
- 4.3 Originally conceived as part of the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside legislation<sup>1</sup> they are 'long green trails' which connect and explore England's<sup>2</sup> most loved and protected landscapes. There is a responsibility on all of us to secure this special resource for present and future generations.

## Benefits

- 4.4 National Trails are a part of a world-class family of long distance routes. The benefits which National Trails provide to society include:

**Enjoyment:** An estimated 12 million people visit National Trails each year<sup>3</sup>, from the spectacular South Downs Way to the tranquil Yorkshire Wolds Way.

**Local economic benefit:** Research has demonstrated how National Trails can boost income to local businesses through tourism. A report published in 2003 estimated that the South West Coast Path generates £307 million a year for the economy of the region, supporting over 7,500 jobs<sup>4</sup>.

**Environmental enhancement:** National Trails pass through some of the most special places in England<sup>5</sup> and have been at the forefront of successfully managing access alongside the interests of nature conservation, landscape character and heritage protection. We expect this positive environmental linkage to develop further over time, with the role of National Trails as access/wildlife corridors connecting with the wider landscape coming even more to the fore.

**Civic engagement:** Many people value National Trails and large numbers get involved with looking after them by joining friends groups or local volunteer networks. More than 50% of the maintenance on the Thames Path is undertaken by volunteers.

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<sup>1</sup> Natural England's responsibility for designation of National Trails stems from the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, celebrated also for its association with protected areas, nature conservation and the recording of public rights of way.

<sup>2</sup> The family of National Trails includes Wales but the scope of this review is England

<sup>3</sup> Countryside Agency 2005, National Treasures

<sup>4</sup> Southwest Tourism / University of Exeter 2003, *South West Coast Path*, research for Countryside Agency

<sup>5</sup> For example: 81% of the Pennine Way passes through sites that are designated for either landscape biodiversity or heritage. Just over 37% of it passes through sites that are internationally designated for biodiversity.

# 5 The Review

## Context

- 5.1 The context for managing National Trails in England has changed in two key respects:
- With public sector resources under great pressure, we must get even better value from the investment of tax payers' money.
  - Government is seeking a smaller role for itself, and a bigger one for civil society – delivering more devolved and locally responsive solutions that harness the knowledge, skills and resources of our partners.
- 5.2 In addressing these imperatives, the new delivery model for National Trails must sustain or enhance their high quality management, their tourism value and the contribution they make to the economy of the local areas through which they pass.

## Aims and objectives

- 5.3 Our ambition for National Trails in the future is for them to be as good as, if not better than, they are today.
- 5.4 The objectives for the review are therefore to:
- Achieve best value from, and make the most effective use of, all the resources available;
  - Make the most of opportunities to involve local people and communities of interest<sup>6</sup> more closely in the management of National Trails; and
  - Agree flexible management arrangements that reflect the needs of National Trails at different stages of their development and in differing circumstances, now and in the future.

## Scope

- 5.5 The review focuses on the management arrangements to support the annual and ongoing routine maintenance of National Trails in England<sup>7</sup>.
- 5.6 The revised management model developed following this consultation will also provide the foundation for upkeep of the England Coast Path as it becomes established in stages over the years to come.

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<sup>6</sup> Such as 'friends of', walking, horse riding and cycling groups, local business fora etc

<sup>7</sup> With Offa's Dyke Path National Trail (which is approximately one third in England and two thirds in Wales) our aim is for the current Welsh-led partnership to continue, whilst accommodating any differences in operational arrangements between the two countries.

## Previous Reviews

- 5.7 There have been a number of National Trail reviews, the most recent being in 2009 when Natural England looked at supply and demand for long distance routes generally. This found strong evidence in support of National Trails and strong 'brand recognition' for the National Trails product, with National Trails consistently scoring more highly than most other promoted routes against a range of measures.

## Audience

- 5.8 The creation and management of National Trails has always been a partnership between central government (through Natural England and its predecessors) and local partners including highway authorities and others such as National Park Authorities and AONB partnerships.
- 5.9 Natural England has found this collaborative approach hugely valuable and would like to explore the opportunities for broadening this approach to include a wider range of partners, including local businesses and communities. We want to hear from users and user groups to gain their thoughts both about the overall principles and approach, and to explore how we might gather their feedback on an ongoing basis.

## 6 A new deal

- 6.1 A well maintained trail is fundamental to the concept of National Trails as high quality routes inspiring confidence and certainty among those who use them, providing a consistently enjoyable and reliable recreational experience. This needs effective local delivery supported by a secure revenue funding stream. High standards for National Trails reinforce the strength of the National Trail 'brand' and act as a lever to bring in resources.

Our core proposition is that central government should continue to invest in trail maintenance across England while Trail Partnerships take responsibility for local delivery.

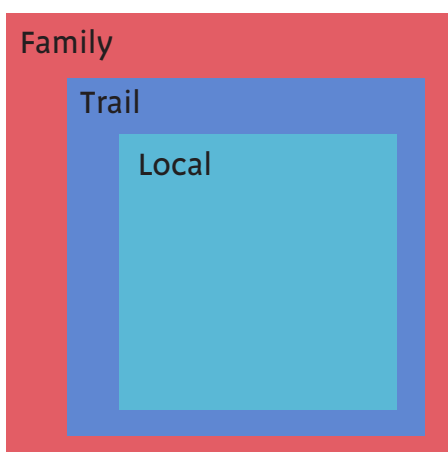
- 6.2 Our basic propositions for future management are:
- Central government investment underpins the maintenance of Trail infrastructure to a high quality;
  - A more fair, equitable and transparent funding system encourages better forward planning and better supports local delivery;
  - Collaboration between local partners enables one Trail Partnership to take responsibility for local delivery of each Trail;
  - Quality standards are essential – but the current approach to them requires adaptation;
  - Users should have a say in how particular Trails are managed and in monitoring the quality of provision; and
  - Success should be measured by the benefits that accrue, rather than through the detail of how Trails are provided.

- 6.3 These propositions are designed to reflect a new delivery landscape in which:
- There is greater local autonomy, free from central government intervention where it is not needed;
  - Community involvement is actively encouraged, giving local people a say in the services provided and harnessing their willingness to report and help resolve problems; and
  - More stable central government investment helps maintain the infrastructure that in turn helps stimulate local economic growth.

**Q1** Do you agree that these propositions describe the right direction of travel?

## 7 Quality standards

- 7.1 During discussions last year our partners told us that quality standards for National Trails are essential. Quality standards provide a useful way of involving people in our work and give Trail users, local businesses and landowners' confidence that routes will be well maintained. Partners also told us that the standards enable them to secure resources but that the current quality standards (established in 2004) needed to be updated and improved to become more measurable and applicable to present day delivery conditions.
- 7.2 Standards need to drive consistently high quality, but not uniformity between Trails. We believe that there should be no reduction in the quality of experience for users and that National Trails should continue to be as good as, or better than they are today. Effective quality standards need to be measurable and to focus on what users of a National Trail can expect, not on how it is provided. We see our role as setting a clearer framework for this, and we propose a nested hierarchy of standards:



- **Family** – describes the overall experience a user can expect of National Trails, including the quality of landscape or information and local services that should be available.
- **Trail** – defines what users can expect on a National Trail, including the quality of the path and its associated infrastructure.
- **Local** – will be developed at an individual trail level to take account of specific trail characteristics. This is the level at which local operational and technical issues should be addressed and unique assets promoted.



- 7.3 The current National Trail Quality Standards will need to be restructured and revised accordingly. Draft Family and Trail Standards are included as an annex to this discussion paper to illustrate how this might be achieved. We propose to convene a working group with partners and stakeholders to advise us on refreshing the Family and Trail Standards and on how they can be measured.
- 7.4 Quality standards will be an integral part of the new model, operating alongside the funding outcomes agreed with Trail Partnerships.

**Q2** Do you agree with the proposed approach to quality standards for National Trails?

**Q3** Do you have any comments on the proposed framework or the draft Family and Trail Standards listed in the Annex on page 16 to this discussion paper?

## 8 Resourcing a well maintained trail

### Channelling national support

- 8.1 Partners have told us that sustained, consistent and reliable central government investment is essential for the effective local delivery of well maintained National Trails. Currently this is provided through Natural England grant support. The feedback also said that a system of grants negotiated and awarded annually can create problems in planning ongoing maintenance. It has also been pointed out that there are significant disparities in the current level of support provided to otherwise comparable trails, a disparity that we recognise and which has arisen because funding has, at least in part, been based on historic spending patterns. We have considered this feedback at length and the proposed changes outlined in this paper are intended to provide a more fair, equitable and transparent funding system that encourages forward planning and supports better local delivery, by:
- Enabling a proactive, preventative approach to planned maintenance that is both more effective, and cheaper in the long term; and
  - Incentivising Trail Partnerships to maximise opportunities for attracting external investment.

## A single grant per National Trail, with indicative funding for three years

- 8.2 In future, we propose that our contribution to National Trails management is made to each National Trail Partnership in the form of a single sum rather than an itemised grant.
- 8.3 The value of our contribution would vary between Trails according to an agreed, simple formula. This would be composed of two elements: a core grant and an additional supplement, added where appropriate to take account of significant differences in maintenance costs between Trails.
- 8.4 Action needed to deal with exceptional events, such as severe weather causing major damage to a Trail would be outside the formula. Providing resources in these circumstances will be dealt with on a case by case basis as the need arises.
- 8.5 Our aim is to move away from annualised grants and, subject to our funding settlement, to confirm the size of our contribution to each Trail for three years. Funds would be paid annually as a single award to Trail Partnerships, streamlining administration and providing some 'transactional efficiencies' to both parties.
- 8.6 To ensure that the funding formula reflects the realities of managing a high quality trail, we want to draw upon the knowledge of those experienced in this work to help us get the detail right. To do this, we want to set up a Working Group of partners and practitioners to advise us on a fair, evidence-based and transparent formula for both core costs and any additional supplements.
- 8.7 Under these proposals, our grant would be offered to Trail Partnerships as a single sum, rather than specifying particular activities or staff posts. Trail Partnerships would have freedom and flexibility to decide how best to deploy resources available to them to achieve a well maintained trail.
- 8.8 One of the consequences of these changes is that the grant funding would no longer state that it was explicitly to fund National Trail Officer posts. This does not mean that these posts are no longer required but the local partnership will have total control of how their funds are deployed, within the constraints of the overall funding package.

**Q4** Do you agree with our proposals for how we provide the central government contribution for local delivery?

**Q5** What special factors do you think should be taken into account in determining the level of award to individual Trails?

**Q6** Do you agree that we should no longer specify that a proportion of any grant must be used to fund a National Trail Officer?

**Q7** Are there any other issues you'd like to raise about our funding proposals? Please explain.

## Local delivery

### Management and distribution of funds

8.9 Our core proposition is that central government invests in maintenance while Trail Partnerships take responsibility for local delivery. For some Trails there is already a structure in place that will make it easier to move to one grant per Trail. In other cases this will be a more significant challenge, which needs time to establish. The proposed changes are designed to give stability and surety to Trail Partnerships, allowing them to manage and distribute funds according to maintenance priorities for their Trail. To a large extent, these maintenance needs are predictable and it is possible to plan for them within an ongoing programme, especially over a three year cycle. For this reason, we intend to allocate our entire planned budget through the funding formula; barring unforeseen events as already described there will be no contingency funds held for National Trails. Trail Partnerships would need to keep this in mind when deciding how funds are utilised.

## Accountability

8.10 The single grant approach outlined has the potential to give Trail Partnerships much greater flexibility and freedom about how funds are used. The level of Natural England's contribution would be fixed, so that Trail Partnerships can benefit from efficiency savings but own direct responsibility for managing the situation where costs overrun. There may be concerns that allowing greater autonomy may result in proactive maintenance being ignored, or funds being diverted to other local priorities. Our response is that Trail Partnerships will be expected to account for expenditure in delivering agreed outcomes and will be open to scrutiny for this as would any public body. (This assumes that the primary recipient of our funding for a Trail is another public body. Should this not be so in a particular case, other suitable accounting requirements will be agreed).

### **The Cotswold Way Trial**

We have a trial with Cotswold Conservation Board to demonstrate how a more outcome orientated approach to funding can better enable local partners to capitalise on the Trail and maximise the value of the investment. The learning from this will inform future implementation, and help us to test out how we measure and account for our funding in a way that maximises local innovation whilst ensuring our investment is well spent.

## Demonstrating local support

- 8.11 A successful family of Trails is an asset both nationally and locally. We expect Trail Partnerships to actively involve local people and businesses in decisions around trail management and this will be reflected in our conditions of funding.
- 8.12 We believe that it is important to draw upon the range of local inputs such as volunteer time and contributions from local businesses to increase the overall resource for trail management and promotion. We are keen to see Trail Partnerships making the best use of these assets in order to attract additional funding.
- 8.13 Currently, local Highway Authorities must contribute a minimum percentage of match funding to receive our grant aid, and partners have emphasised the value of this requirement in securing local support for the Trails. We therefore propose to calculate our single grant to each Trail on the basis that, over a three year period, local Highway Authority funding will continue to be required at a minimum ratio of 1:3 (local Highway Authority funding to central government funding) in order to meet the quality standards for a well-maintained trail. By accepting the grant, each Trail Partnership and its constituent Highway Authorities will, in effect be acknowledging and accepting that continuing requirement.

## Meeting user needs

- 8.14 That users have enjoyable and rewarding experiences is essential for National Trails. As well as the opportunity to support local service delivery, we believe that users should have a strong voice in how services are provided. Monitoring the quality of provision, identifying any problems that arise, and collecting user feedback, are essential components in the new model of devolved responsibility and greater flexibility. Trail Partnerships will be expected to involve users in monitoring trail quality and in decision making processes. Partnerships should be asked to report on user satisfaction as a requirement of grant aid.

**Q8** Do you agree that Trail Partnerships should be responsible for local delivery?

**Q9** How can Trail Partnerships demonstrate value for money?

**Q10** Do you agree that users should be involved in monitoring quality of provision and have more say in how Trails are provided?

**Q11** What could be done to help users get more involved in looking after National Trails?

## 9 Raising the profile of National Trails

- 9.1 National Trails have a strong identity and our market research shows that the acorn trademark symbol is widely recognised and associated with high quality provision. Partners tell us that they want to be part of a coherent national family because this raises the profile of individual Trails and means that they can reach a larger audience. They have reminded us that having people using Trails is fundamental to achieving the benefits that we have identified, so marketing and the provision of reliable and up to date information on the Trails is essential.
- 9.2 Promoting the family of Trails widens the audience (including internationally), supports English tourism and complements the promotion of individual Trails. Both are needed: promotion of the concept as well as information about individual Trails that helps visitors choose the experiences that will suit them and plan their visit accordingly. Partners value what we do as custodians of the National Trails brand and think that the family needs a focal point at the national level. However we recognise that a new approach may be needed to promote the family of National Trails more effectively. As part of the review, and working jointly with Countryside Council for Wales<sup>8</sup>, we are exploring the feasibility of a new partnership for the family of Trails. We think there may be opportunities for others to get involved in the promotion of National Trails, capitalising on the National Trails acorn brand and the high levels of public recognition, with Natural England playing a more facilitative role to ensure continued brand quality and integrity.

**Q12** Do you think we could improve the way that the family of National Trails is promoted? If so, how?

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<sup>8</sup> The family of National Trails includes Wales and the acorn trademark is jointly owned between Natural England and Countryside Council for Wales.

## 10 Evidence of success

- 10.1 Significant sums of public money are invested in National Trails every year to ensure continued provision to the highest standards. For this to continue, it is vital to strengthen understanding of the benefits that National Trails bring to society. We will continue to play a role in setting out a framework for evaluating success, but are reliant on the good will and support of partners and stakeholders to contribute information that will help us to make the case for continued support of this national asset.

## 11 Next steps

- 11.1 The responses to this consultation will be analysed by Natural England. We will publish a report from this consultation, setting out our response to the views submitted. Working with appropriate partners and stakeholders we will continue to develop:
- The quality standards;
  - Funding mechanism; and
  - A new approach to promotion.
- 11.2 We intend to introduce some changes from April 2013, but the extent and detail of these changes will depend on the responses that we receive to the proposals described in this discussion paper. We recognise that the proposed changes may have more significant implications for some of our partners than others and we will be talking to all of them during the autumn of 2012 about how we manage the implementation stages.

# 12 Annex

## National Trail Quality Standards

Our current quality standards for National Trails in England were established in 2004. They comprise 54 standards and 24 measures grouped into themes. The following is included to illustrate how the standards could be incorporated into our suggested framework.

As described, we plan to convene a working group to help restructure and further define the National Trail Quality Standards and how they will be measured.

The standards will be described from a point of view of what a user can expect:

- a) Of National Trails in general (the Family Standard); and
- b) When out on a trail (the Trail Standard).

The new framework also includes local standards, to incorporate trail specific features or more technical aspects to aid local delivery.

### Family Standard

These describe the overall experience a user can expect of National Trails, including the quality of landscape or information and local services that should be available. The Family Standard will be ambitious in nature and measurement will be more subjective than for the Trail Standard.

We want users to:

- Feel inspired by our finest landscapes
- Be able to trust and feel confident in the quality of path
- Have an attractive choice of experiences to suit a wide range of needs and abilities
- Have access to reliable information to help them plan a visit and to find out about and use local services and facilities; and
- Have access to good supporting local services to enable their use of the route

### Trail Standard

These define what users can expect when on a National Trail, including the quality of the path and its associated infrastructure. Ensuring that trails are well maintained is essential and this standard and associated measures will need to be tightly defined.

National Trail users can expect:

- Easy access to information about the path and its associated infrastructure.
- A safe, continuous, predominantly off road, trail on legally defined routes.

Their enjoyment should be enhanced by a path that is:

- Well-sited to appreciate the surrounding landscape.
- Maintained sympathetically to its terrain and surroundings, and appropriately for its use.
- Easy to follow with unobtrusive but clear signage and consistently marked with our acorn trademark.

Use of Trails should not be impeded:

- The path is readily passable and unobstructed by vegetation.
- Boundary crossings and structures are well-maintained, safe, comfortable, easy and convenient to use.
- The path has a sustainable surface that is well-managed and with minimal engineering and making use of materials that are in keeping with local landscape, historical features and habitat.

## Local Standards

Should take account of trail specific features, for example:

- The Pennine Way may choose to develop a more detailed standard taking into account the technical issues of stone flagging over heavily eroded peat moorland.
- The Hadrian's Wall Path may develop further extensive standards with regards to protecting archaeological remains beneath the path surface.
- The Pennine Bridleway may develop specific standard for equine facilities such as parking for horseboxes, equipped with hitching posts, available near the trail.



Front cover image: Walking in nature's garden - the Cleveland Way National Trail  
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Natural England is here to secure a healthy natural environment for people to enjoy, where wildlife is protected and England's traditional landscapes are safeguarded for future generations.

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