

Integrated Access demonstration projects – lessons learnt

Integrated Access Management is a new way of improving access to the Countryside. It is about assessing the needs of the widest possible audience.

The IADP's were established for three years and 50% funded by the Countryside Agency. The projects were set up with different types of host organisation, funding arrangement and working situation. The Countryside Agency provided a framework to help guide each project and to provide each with more specific objectives.

Introduction

In 2000 the Countryside Agency established a new initiative aimed at encouraging better access to the countryside for informal recreation. This new approach – Integrated Access – linked a desire to deliver more, and better, access to aspirations for wider social and economic benefits that would help local communities. The approach was tested through a programme of six pilot projects – the Integrated Access Demonstration Projects (IADPs) and began in 2001.

The IADPs were established for three years hosted by a partner organisation and fifty per cent funded by the Countryside Agency. The projects had defined geographical areas in the following locations: Surrey, South East Hampshire, Chilterns AONB, Lake District National Park, Lancashire, Yorkshire.

The development of the IADPs was relevant to the implementation of part II of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) 2000. They should help to inform and influence the preparation of Rights of Way Improvement Plans (ROWIPs) by testing new ways of improving access. They should also inform the development of other countryside access initiatives and strategies related to the ROWIPs, including countryside recreation strategies, Milestones statements and other Rights of Way work promoted under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act.

Summary of the IADP Programme

The six IADP projects were designed and located to test the concept of linking countryside recreation to wider socio-economic issues under a variety of scenarios, with different host organisations, funding packages and working situations. They were established with a set of national objectives, together with local targets that matched each project's own particular set of circumstances, structure, geographical area and focus.

The national objectives for the IADPs were to:

- develop access management strategies that consider the needs of all countryside users;
- increase awareness of access issues amongst local planning authorities;
- build innovative partnerships to deliver physical access opportunities;
- find new sources of funding to assist integrated access management;
- test different methods for improving physical access opportunities;
- discover the best way to deliver information to the public;
- demonstrate how access can be successfully integrated with conservation and land management; and
- show how access can deliver social and economic benefits.

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Added value: a project identity. Some of the schemes developed could have been achieved outside the project but generally not within the same timescale and to the same quality. The initiative provided the means to achieve them.

Integrated access also looks beyond the boundary of a right of way. For example, rather than seeing a farm as a site crossed by a right of way the benefits from the farm can be viewed in a much wider context: its contribution to local landscape character, and its social and economic importance.

Five of the six projects employed a dedicated officer, or consultant, and each was a partnership between the Countryside Agency, a host authority or institution and other relevant organisations. The first began in summer 2000 and the final project finishes in spring 2005. Each project will have run for three years.

IADP areas

The six projects were distributed around England in a variety of situations. Two were based within protected landscapes, three within county council rights of way departments, and one with a water company within an upland catchment.

South East Hampshire

Focused at a sub-county scale and co-ordinated by a project officer, this project concentrated on the relationship between urban communities and the countryside and examined urban fringe access issues. The project worked closely with local planning authorities to identify ways in which new development can provide improved access to meet future needs, particularly through strategic planning.

Lancashire

A countywide project operated by the Lancashire's Countryside Service under the title 'Access all Areas'. The primary focus was on developing and testing mechanisms for analysing use and demand at a county scale.

The Chilterns

The Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty covers two government regions and part of four counties, one unitary and ten district authorities. A project officer was employed to explore ways to overcome problems created by these administrative boundaries and improve access through partnership working.

Lake District

'Open Return' is the only IADP set within a National Park. The project officer investigated the social, economic and environmental benefits of sustainable transport options in the countryside and demonstrated how integrated access management can help combat social exclusion.

Surrey

The Surrey Countryside Access Initiative, co-ordinated through an individual officer, tackled high car dependency. It explored how local economies can benefit from countryside access. Research revealed that increasing information to the public should be a priority.

Rishworth Moor Yorkshire

This project was chosen to pilot a specific approach to integrating access in an area of high nature conservation interest. The project delivered by consultants, started in 1999 in anticipation of CRoW. It focussed on a specific area of moorland owned by Yorkshire Water that is subject to a number of different nature conservation designations. It was an opportunity to pilot the Countryside Agency's Area Access Planning approach that was developed by the Yorkshire and Humber region. The project concluded August 2003.

Joined up action:

Integrated access has provided a powerful mechanism which enables cross departmental working.

Integrated Access doesn't necessarily require additional resources. The major cost in much of the demonstration work has been in terms of officer time and energy.

Key findings

The evaluation of the IADPs, conducted in 2004, revealed they were considered by their partners to have been particularly successful in achieving their objectives and in demonstrating that an Integrated Access approach can have considerable benefits in tackling access issues in the countryside. The key findings were:

- Integrating rights of way management with social and economic development is a cost-effective way of developing better access to the countryside.
- Integrated access is particularly effective where the approach and the range of schemes developed considers issues of supply and demand, fulfils many different physical and intellectual requirements, and operates within existing strategies, policies and delivery mechanisms.
- The integrated approach shows landowners that the ROW authority considers the farm and its collective benefits as a whole, not just the rights of way crossing it.
- Producing information and interpretation materials, about where to go, how to get there and what to see when you have arrived, is as important as enhancing the physical infrastructure.
- By developing strong working partnerships with other organisations and interest groups the ROW authority is seen more as a partner than as a regulator or adversary.
- A conciliatory and consensus seeking approach results in a net gain in the resolution of ROW issues, compared with the more traditional regulatory and confrontational approach.

Guidelines for the future

By adopting a broad and multi-disciplinary approach to managing both physical and intellectual access, and building project 'packages' through partnerships, the benefits for the community of Integrated Access can be significant. If a local authority, or other organisation, wishes to develop an initiative embodying the IA principles to tackle access issues there are a number of essential components that will help to achieve success. These include:

Appoint a Project Officer – to coordinate activities and contribute new skills. This is not a critical requirement but it can help significantly to allocate sufficient time to develop new activities and also to bring new skills and experiences to a countryside or rights of way section.

Establish a working budget – to provide negotiation power and leverage for funds from other departments and organisations.

Establish an effective steering mechanism – with clear terms of reference. Steering groups need to be both effective and efficient with all members understanding their roles and responsibilities.

Provide a clear strategic direction – what is it intended to achieve and within what timescale? The host organisation needs to have a clear idea of the strategic direction of the project.

Assess and work within existing strategic and policy frameworks – the projects need not 're-invent wheels' but consolidate current activity. By using existing policy and organisational frameworks an integrated access approach can exploit and build on many current initiatives.

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ROWIP (Rights of Way Improvement plans) and Access Strategies:

The projects have helped to prepare for the development of ROWIPs and Countryside Access Strategies by finding a means to prioritise the management of rights of way and by linking closely with the Local Access forum. They have also identified clearly the need to consider rights of way and the development of ROWIPs as one part of the broader approach to access management in the countryside. The value of the projects has therefore been to clarify and priorities access objectives.

Identify priority – balancing needs and opportunities for countryside access. A key component of Integrated Access is identifying priority for countryside access through a clear understanding of the current resource, the demand for its use, the roles and aspirations of other organisations, together with realistic assessment of opportunity.

Develop a vision for 'Access' rather than 'Rights of Way' – considering Rights of Way as part of a wider spectrum of access to the countryside. An Integrated Access approach should consider the functions of public footpaths, bridleways and other rights of way in the broader context of informal recreation, sustainable tourism, transportation, etc.

Develop a vision for landscape – considering farmland for its wider social and economic benefits rather than simply as a resource for rights of way. By discussing these issues with landowners and farmers the rights of way can be viewed as part of a wider discussion on recreational and economic opportunities for mutual benefit.

Prepare and information and interpretation materials, and distribute effectively – people need to know where to go, how to get there and what to do and see when they arrive. These are simple needs, but are often neglected in countryside and access management. Integrated access tackles these essential issues as part of the overall approach.

Further reading

Evaluation of IADP final report, June 2004. Red Kite Environment.

Integrated Access Management, new ways to help people enjoy the countryside, CA 178. Includes contact details for all the pilot projects.

Countryside Agency Research Notes can also be viewed on our website:
www.countryside.gov.uk