The Northumberland National Park and County Joint Local Access Forum (JLAF) is a statutory advisory body established by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. Appointed by the Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA) and Northumberland County Council (NCC), the JLAF advises these authorities and other Section 94 (4) bodies including the Secretary of State; Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA); Ministry of Defence; Natural England; Forestry Commission; English Heritage; and town and parish councils in Northumberland.

At its meetings, site visits and in the provision of advice JLAF regularly considers matters relating to improving, maintaining and promoting opportunities for accessing the Northumberland countryside. Our submission is, therefore, focussed on the following key question:

**Access: What, if any, changes are needed to give people better access to the coast and countryside?**

Tourism is the second most important employment sector in Northumberland and as with many other rural areas there has been increased emphasis on marketing the county as a place where visitors can experience the spectacular landscape in active ways and gain a real sense of adventure. In fact visitnorthumberland promotes the county as the destination where independent spirit comes to life.

Northumberland has over 5000 km of rights of way and 115,000ha of access land so is ideally positioned to capitalise on the significant economic value attributed to the development and promotion of walking, cycling and equine tourism. However, having such a physical resource is not sufficient to enable this. It needs to be maintained to a standard that supports the activity and level of use, be adaptable to change, meet the expectations of users and in itself be accessible.

**Changes that would improve the situation:**

*Funding for rights of way and access land*
- There should be a review of how the management and maintenance of rights of way and access land are funded.
- Funding for key tourism routes e.g. National Trails should be ring fenced.
- Visitor payback or local tourism tax to support ongoing maintenance and improvements.
- Incentives for tourism businesses to invest in their local rights of way network.

*Public transport*
As rural areas suffer from limited, or no, local bus services it is essential for visitors to have readily available timetable information.

Services specifically aimed at visitors, such as the AD122 that serves Hadrian’s Wall, need to have funding secured well in advance of the start of the tourist season so that visitors can plan their trips.

Taxis often have a key role in plugging gaps in school transport provision in remoter rural areas. Could this be extended into some form of tourism transport initiative?

Reopening of railway stations, in particular, Gilsland.

**Road access & parking**

- Better road surfacing of minor roads. Deep potholes and ruts at the sides of narrow roads, which can damage vehicles, are a deterrent.
- Lower speed limits on all single track rural roads, which form part of the walking, riding, cycling network. More verge cutting so there is a safe refuge for vulnerable road users when faced with oncoming farm machinery.
- Parking areas are needed at places which form natural taking off points for use of the rights of way network and access land.
- The widening and hardening of verges in places where people are likely to want to start a walk or ride. This may only provide space for a few vehicles at a time but it would still be a great help. Perhaps farmers could be offered a small sum for a piece of rough land or track suitable for parking. The provision of such places would reduce the risk of people parking in field gateways and would spread the load on the rights of way network.
- Parking places suitable for horse trailers close to beaches should be provided. Horse riders enjoy riding on beaches, all year round, but it is severely limited by the lack of places to park.

**Sources of information**

- How people access information on walking, riding and cycling in the countryside has changed dramatically in recent years and will continue to do so. The smartphone may already have ousted the OS map. It remains important that however a visitor gets their information it gives them the confidence to enjoy their visit safely
- Better use of social media for pre-visit information and live updates on path/open access closures etc.
- The destination and the distance to it should appear on the arms of all finger posts on the rights of way network. This should be a national standard.
- Every parish should be encouraged and funded to identify, promote and maintain circular routes for walkers, horse riders and cyclists in their parish and adjacent ones.

*A pleasant experience on the rights of way network*
• Additional funding is needed to improve the condition of the rights of way network if users, especially visitors, are to be confident that they can enjoy a walk or ride that they have decided to do. One bad experience can put people off.
• Multi-user routes, available to a wider range of users i.e. bridleways, should be the focus for improvements and extensions to the network.
• There is scope for all public footpaths which are 2-3m or more wide to be upgraded to bridleway in order to make the network for all more connected. It should not be necessary for these upgradings to be done one at a time based on historic evidence.
• Stiles, especially ladder stiles, should be replaced with wicket gates unless there is a proven agricultural reason for keeping them.
• Gates on popular public bridleways should all be well hung (not grounded) and with catches on the top bar so they can be opened from the saddle with one hand from either side by horse riders. The need for constant dismounting is a deterrent to use.
• Farmers should be advised not to put cattle in fields with popular rights of way going through them, especially when they are first put out in the spring, to reduce the risk of accidents and the fear that they create. Due to the increasing number of reported accidents involving cattle, this fear is becoming a considerable deterrent to the use of the countryside by the public.
• Something that is becoming a major issue is the lack of public toilets in rural areas. On some popular walking routes the presence of human excrement is an increasing problem. There are various initiatives to tackle the problem across the UK but more needs to be done to raise awareness and educate the public.

Access to the countryside and coast for all
• Horse riders and cyclists are very limited as to their use of the rights of way network due to the system of recording the status of individual paths in the 1950s. A new method related to current needs should be developed. This should also allow for changes to be made on basis future needs and demands of users as well as adaptations to accommodate climate change e.g. the constant washing out of bridges as flood risk increases.
• Open access land is only legally open to walkers. If all existing tracks, whether carrying public or private rights, across open access land were to be made open to horse riders and cyclists, this would be a major attraction for those user groups to visit and explore the wilder area of countryside. In addition it would reduce the potentially dangerous mix of those users and motor vehicles on rural roads.
• An opportunity to increase rural tourism has been missed by creating the England Coast Path for walkers only. Every effort should be made to upgrade suitable sections (not the whole route) so that horse riders and cyclists can use it too.
• Technological advances in all terrain mobility scooters could result in the countryside becoming more accessible for less able and older visitors.
In summing up we would say that a significant amount could be done to reap the economic benefits of rural tourism by:--

a) ensuring visitors have the information they need to confidently plan a visit to the countryside or coast using existing access provision and

b) that funding is in place to ensure key rights of way and access land are well maintained and any necessary improvements made.

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