

Report to: Executive Member
Environmental Services

Date: 29th June 2009

Report of: Director of Environmental
Services

Report No: EMES/274/09

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Report Title: Proposed amendment to Local Access Forum arrangements

Non Confidential

This report does **not** contain information which warrants its consideration in the absence of the press or members of the public

Recommendations:

Executive Member is recommended to approve Bolton Council's withdrawal from the existing Greater Manchester Pennine Fringe Local Access Forum, on the basis that the Council enters into a new joint forum with Bury Council pursuant to Section 94 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

Decision:

Background Doc(s):

Signed:

Leader / Executive Member

Monitoring Officer

Date:

Background information

1. All local authorities in England and Wales have a duty under Section 94 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to establish a Local Access Forum.
2. Local Access Forums were set up to allow people with a variety of interests to take part in balanced discussions on access related issues. Relevant issues include Rights of Way Improvement Plans, Access Land, Gating Orders and fire prevention measures on moorland. Forums are obliged to meet at least three times a year.
3. Bolton is currently a member of the Greater Manchester Pennine Fringe Local Access Forum, along with the neighbouring authorities of Bury, Rochdale, Oldham and Tameside. The Forum was established in 2001 and from March 2009 is being hosted by Bury Council.
4. The decision to enter into a joint forum was made soon after the commencement of Section 94 of the Act, on the basis that the five authorities shared a common characteristic, i.e. their proximity to the Pennine fringe moorland.

History of the forum

5. The first meetings of the forum were held in Tameside between 2001 and 2003. Originally there were fifteen members, most of whom attended the first few meetings which were involved in providing comments on the proposed designation of open countryside (Access Land), and registered common land to the overseeing government body, the Countryside Agency, (now Natural England).
6. Following the production of the maps interest in the forum amongst members dwindled dramatically with some meetings having as few as four members attending. This appears to be due to a number of factors, including confusion amongst members as to what their continued role was, frustration amongst members at responses from DEFRA and Natural England to funding queries, and the constraints of time and travel in having to attend meetings outside of their own area.
7. The forum has since been hosted by Rochdale between 2003 and 2005, Oldham between 2005 and 2007 and Bolton between April 2007 and March 2009, during which times the same problem has persisted.

The access forum in Bolton

8. The secretariat and hosting functions for the forum were transferred to Bolton in April 2007 with regular meetings being held at Mere Hall. Upon receiving the secretariat it was decided that the issue of membership needed to be addressed. Five new members were recruited who came from across the five authorities. During this time members were involved in the production of Rights of Way Improvement Plans (RoWIP) and encouraged to contribute to specific improvements they wanted to see in the plans for their respective areas.
9. The end of the RoWIP process has left a further hole in the remit of the forum, bringing into question the merits of its continued existence. Attendances have again started to decline since the individual RoWIP's were adopted.

Proposed amendments to Bolton's access forum arrangements

10. The Public Rights of Way Officers from the five authorities who supervise the forum are all of the same opinion that the forum should disband, and re-form as two new more local forums.
11. The proposed new arrangement is for Bolton and Bury Council's to form a new joint local access forum, and for Rochdale, Oldham and Tameside to create a new forum. It is felt that a joint Bolton and Bury Forum would be far more representative of access issues within the Bolton area, and as such would attract more local members with the desired mix of interests.
12. Providing the secretariat and hosting the new forum would alternate on a yearly basis between the two boroughs, starting with Bury for 2009/10.

Financial considerations

15. The cost of running each forum meeting is approximately £300. This excludes the secretariat function which is an extended function of each authority's Public Rights of Way service. The average cost to the authority over a two year period at current prices would be approximately £900/annum, which can be met from within existing budgets.

Recommendations

16. Executive Member is recommended to approve Bolton Council's withdrawal from the existing Greater Manchester Pennine Fringe Local Access Forum, on the basis that the Council enters into a new joint forum with Bury Council pursuant to Section 94 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

HE/HEDeI/DW/DLT
12th May 2009