

National Audit Office: The Right of Access To Open Countryside Summary

Implementation

- Open access was introduced between September 2004 and October 2005, ahead of the target of December 2005.
- In 95% of the NAO's site visits, there was easy access to the land, and it was possible to walk across land without obstruction in more than 90% of cases.
- Obstacles which did exist appeared to pre-date the right to roam, and in most cases changes were already planned.
- People from inner cities and those on low incomes may have difficulties making use of this new right: 20 per cent of sites visited were accessible by bus or train.

Information

- Ordnance Survey's task of revising its maps in time was largely accomplished – all 69 walking maps covering the first four access areas were issued when the right came into effect.
- Leaflets about open access were available at most tourist information centres and 2/3 of staff could answer questions about open access.
- Most sites were clearly signposted, although 27 per cent had no signs and some outdated signs which the NAO found could cause confusion.
- Details of access land are available on the Countryside Access website, but the site can be difficult to navigate and the maps were difficult to read, although they have since been upgraded.
- The Countryside Agency's helpline has been advertised as a public helpline

Costs

- The Countryside Agency's initial estimate for implementing open access was £28m but it eventually spent £52.6m on the programme. This was due to:
 - The difficulties of estimating the cost of a one-off project;
 - A desire to avoid delays meant the Agency did not run a pilot scheme;
 - The Agency did not adequately assess the risks involved, and underestimated the amount of work needed to map access land.
- Total government expenditure on the project was £69m to the end of March.

Recommendations

- That the Countryside Agency reviews
 - The use of its open access website to ensure the information is easy to find;
 - Clarifies confusion over its helpline;
 - Targets tourist information centres in providing information about the new right.
- The Agency should also:
 - Encourage clear signs on where dogs are allowed;
 - Encourage authorities to consider promoting weekend bus services so that people on low incomes and from urban areas can exercise this new right;
 - And test work required for the ten-year review of access maps to develop accurate estimates of the likely cost.