



Words Matthew Sutcliffe

A new leafe

Richard Leafe, Northwest regional director of Natural England, the country's newest agency.

Imagine being able to walk unobstructed around the entire 4,500 km of the English coastline. Anyone who possesses the desire and a stout pair of walking shoes should be able to do just that, says the government's newest agency, Natural England. The agency is calling for legislation that would lead to a £50 million scheme to create a clear and well-managed access corridor around the full length of England's coast.

"We think this approach will be a multiple win – for the environment, for the land managers... and for increased enjoyment of our coastal wildlife and landscapes by the public," said the agency's chair, Sir Martin Doughty. "The principle is clear. The public should have consistent and secure access around their coastline."

In the Northwest, the man ultimately responsible for work on coastal access would be Richard Leafe, Natural England's new regional director. "It's an ambitious programme, but luckily vast lengths of the Northwest coastline are already accessible," says Leafe. Natural England came into being last October, and Leafe has been at the helm in the Northwest since the first day. Its roots go back to November 2003, when Lord Haskins published his influential report into the future of biodiversity and rural issues in England, calling for a far more joined up approach.

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The government's response was to merge the old English Nature with parts of the Countryside Agency and the Rural Development Service, creating Natural England. Expectations are high for the new body and there is an eagerness amongst many in the environmental and heritage fields to see if it can deliver on its promise.

Says Leafe: "I take criticism of the earlier organisations squarely on the chin, even as someone who worked for English Nature for many years. There was clearly duplication of what they were doing and they were too focused on the countryside."

"We're righting a wrong that goes back almost 60 years to when the original bodies were first established, splitting apart responsibility for nature conservation and the landscape. Natural England reunites those two

complementary roles into one powerful body."

He goes on: "It creates an organisation with a £500 million budget – we have about ten per cent of that in the region. Most of it goes on payments to farmers for looking after nature and wildlife on their land, but even so it clearly gives us some clout."

The scheme to improve coastal access is typical of what distinguishes Natural England from its predecessors, says Leafe. For one thing, it underlines the agency's broader remit, taking in not just the countryside but coastal, marine and urban environments as well.

It also raises the question of access to green spaces, including the coast, which is one of a number of new issues the agency has been charged with promoting. Others include health and recreation.

Leafe explains that a new project, Steps to Sport, is being pioneered in the Northwest with the aim of tackling health problems, particularly obesity. It's a partnership with Sport England that uses two approaches to get people involved with sport. For those whose last encounter with sport was probably on the school playing field, it aims to open the door and encourage them to get involved again. While for people who have always enjoyed the sporting life but are being forced to slow down, either through injury or age, it helps to find new activities through which they can remain active and involved.

For Leafe and his Northwest team, some of their new responsibilities, such as the call to do more in urban areas, will have profound consequences. In a region with a population of around 7 million, much of it in densely populated urban areas, Natural England will find itself working in places – literally and figuratively – where English Nature feared to tread.

"One of the things we want to do much better is connect people to the natural environment, wherever they live," comments Leafe. "There's already a fantastic green resource in towns and cities, but you need to know where to look."

"Our national target is for every citizen to have a quality green space within five minutes walk of where they live. We now have a £25 million grant scheme called Access to the Local Environment to provide new green spaces and improve existing ones."

"The green infrastructure has been overlooked – it should be planned in from the beginning of projects and developments, the way transport or schools already are."

TURNING POINTS

1987 – graduates from Sheffield University with a degree in geography. Goes on to take a masters degree in geography, also at Sheffield.

1990 – starts his first job, as a tour leader for Explore Worldwide working in Egypt, Israel and the Middle East.

1991 – joins the Nature Conservancy Council as a coastal geomorphologist, covering the whole of the UK.

1996 – becomes European relations manager for English Nature, dealing with European nature organisations and the European Commission, where 70 per cent of environmental legislation originates.

2002 – promoted to regional head of English Nature in the Midlands.

2007 – takes up new post as regional director of Natural England in the Northwest.