

**From:** atmarlow@aol.com  
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Hi Everyone,

Thank you for the input and comments you provided to me in preparation for the meeting that Mark Weston and I had with the Forestry Commission at Beaconsfield earlier this week. Below is a short summary of the meeting to keep you in the picture.

Mark is writing a more detailed note of the meeting (I have stolen some of the words below from his draft!) and I will be following up further as noted below.

We met with Simon Hodgson, (FC Chief Executive) together with David Williamson, Paddy Harrop and the local forest manager for the area around Buckinghamshire, including Hodgemoor. We also met Susie Bicknell who, together with her husband, is the driving force behind the Hodgemoor Wood scheme which we visited in the afternoon.

The meeting was quite lengthy, and spent quite a lot of time discussing the principles and reasoning which has us in the situation we are in today. One thing I was able to achieve was to give Simon Hodgson a firm reminder of the role of LAFs. He was clearly previously of the impression that we were all something of a non-event! (as evidenced by the FC's failure to properly involve us in the recent consultation until we prompted them).

There were no stunning revelations or massive changes of direction at the meeting, it would have been very surprising if there had been!, but there was a definite willingness to try to move the whole business forward by utilising some creative thinking and by being open minded about how to progress. However, Simon made it clear that the FC do not have access to any additional funds for infrastructure work. As with all publicly funded bodies the government is squeezing budgets tighter and tighter and they have to balance their books. This means that any improvements (for any class of user) have to be self funding (by applying for grants, fundraising or whatever). We were reminded that a lot of work done for cyclists in the FC estate has been funded by way of Sustrans for instance.

The FC did state that they have no plans for introducing any further equestrian permit schemes and if they do consider any more they will consult properly beforehand.

Mark made it clear that equestrians are more than happy to contribute to Forestry Commission income as walkers and cyclists do by paying car parking charges and purchasing refreshments at the cafes after they have been riding, etc.

We obtained quite a bit of data on costs, permit numbers etc, both from the FC and from Susie, who spent several hours with us as we walked round Hodgemoor. This data needs some digesting!

I believe that there is scope for LAFs in the SE region to sponsor some realistic forward thinking on this whole subject, but it won't be easy! It's an ideal topic that is well within our brief so we should pick up the challenge.

What I propose is that I will report back more fully to the meeting of SE Region LAF chairs that is planned for 26<sup>th</sup> January, I will endeavour to produce a discussion note in advance of the meeting. This will give chairmen an opportunity to informally brief themselves from their LAF members before the meeting so that we can attempt to put together something more formal for LAFs to look at after 26<sup>th</sup> January.

My immediate off-the-cuff thoughts are that I would like to encourage each of the LAFs (certainly those that think they have a problem) to think about encouraging some kind of local co-ordinated approach to 'new thinking', perhaps along the lines of the Hodgemoor model, perhaps along some other suitable line that individual local groups may think of. (It is clear to me that one of the biggest drawbacks of the Hodgemoor model is that it depends very much on the enthusiasm of one or two local volunteers to run it, this sort of commitment is hard to find and sustain!!). I suspect that in the past this sort of activity has generally not happened because local FC managers have not been receptive to suggestions of change. I think one thing this week's meeting made clear is that the FC are open to positive suggestions, and if resistance by FC managers is encountered at local levels we now have the contacts to escalate such matters in the hope of getting something changed.

Quite a challenge, but worth the effort I believe!

Alan Marlow  
SE Region LAF Representative