

England Access Forum

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29th March 2010

Dear Fellow LAF Chair,

In the light of the responses received from LAFs since my letter to you on 8th February, the LAF representatives of the England Access Forum met on Monday 8th March in London to consider how best to proceed in the light of the strongly expressed view that an England Access Forum is needed and should be enabled to continue to speak for LAFs at a national level and to champion the cause of access more widely. The paper which was considered is available on request.

In the light of the very considerable difficulties presented by being reliant on Natural England for support it was resolved that

- Every effort must be made to ensure that EAF is able to continue and widen its work on behalf of the LAFs which it represents
- Continuing with Natural England on the present basis was no longer an option
- There was a need to discuss with the Minister alternative sources of support and funding.
- That discussions should centre on DEFRA providing or facilitating a means of ensuring that EAF is free to advise and contribute as LAFs and regions see fit
- That the period between now and the forthcoming election be used for discussions with all three main parties. Warm support for the continuation of EAF has been received from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. A letter was sent some time ago to the Minister requesting a meeting.

Natural England has since informed us that they intend to carry out unilaterally a review of EAF. I have pointed out that it was agreed at the outset that this review would be done jointly. Furthermore it would have to be carried out acknowledging fully the difficulties which have prevented EAF from functioning effectively for over a year now. I am pleased to say that Natural England has accepted that a review should be a joint one, specifically recognising that EAF cannot continue on the existing basis and that while

preserving links with Natural England will need a broader support and funding mechanism. A joint letter will be sent in due course to LAF Secretaries and sufficient consultation time will be allowed for every LAF to meet and respond.

As a timely illustration of the need to consider the way forward in the light of effectively a 'lost year' there was on the Agenda in London a considerable list of important topics which LAFs and regions have submitted to EAF for discussion with Natural England. These are really the very things to which we should be directing all our time, talents, experience and energies.

We resolved that without prejudicing the outcome of our discussions about adequate support for EAF, we should request a meeting with Natural England in May to discuss these and any other items which you request. The list at present is:

1. Ensuring that planning procedures are updated to embrace LAFs where appropriate
2. Lack of balance within in NE over environment and access
3. Meeting with Sustrans – rural tarmac and apparent exclusion of horse riders
4. Undergrazing and Access
5. Progress from NE on undertaking to raise gating orders with government
6. Forestry commission –
Claims that no new access routes can be developed on its land
Access to forestry commission (and Woodland Trust) land
7. 4x4 and motorized vehicle issues
8. Replacing BVPI 178 system with greater safeguards for ROWIPs
9. A more holistic approach to policy to encompass all non-motorised users
10. Fencing of open Access Land
11. Tree Planting and Section 16 of the CROW Act

I hope that there will be positive news in the next few months as we continue to explore a workable and lasting solution for the Forum. Personally, I have been privileged to meet many of you in recent months and have been enormously impressed with the dedication and enthusiasm I have seen. Access is fundamental to so many agendas from recreation to health and diversity and yet it is somehow a "Cinderella" service for which all too often LAFs are the main and sometimes the only advocates. The evidence is that we do individually and collectively "make a difference", but there is much more to do.

Best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Duncan Graham
Chair of Cumbria LAF and EAF