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All Local Access Forum Chairs

5 April 2011

From Richard Benyon MP
Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries

Dear LAF Chairs

In writing this letter I want to introduce myself, as the Minister for Natural Environment, and Fisheries, and underline the importance I attach to the dedicated work of Local Access Forums (LAFs) around the country.

I have already had contact with some Forums on specific issues, but I am keen to set out how I see the role of Forums developing in the future. Since their initial establishment Forums have improved and evolved, developing as new challenges arise. Forums continue as statutory consultees on relevant matters, but there is still considerable flexibility and scope for individual Forums to work in ways which are most suited to their specific local and community needs. I know Forums also have a potential to advise, assist and influence the Government on its work on access.

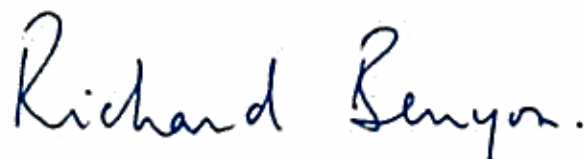
Forums are adapting to the various challenges on access in different ways and I believe it is important that best practice can be shared widely. I am aware that the links between individual Forums and central government, and its agencies, need to be clear and I want to work at improving these links. There is also a need for all bodies receiving advice from Forums to be fully aware of their statutory status and the role of Forums and the value of their advice.

Access is now taking on a central role in achieving many of the Government's targets on health and promoting more sustainable rural communities. It also has a significant importance in helping people engage with the natural environment.

Following on from outlining the importance of access and the key role of LAFs, I am consulting with LAFs on a suite of proposals aimed at improving the information flow between LAFs and Government. I would be grateful for your views on these with a view to taking forward the most popular proposals. Natural England will be co-ordinating the responses and reporting back to me.

- A virtual forum for LAF members for sharing best practise and exchanging views, as well as identifying key LAF issues. A means for Defra and Natural England to provide guidance, training and updates on access, including the possibility of hosting a 'hot seat' where the Minister would do a question and answer session.
- A memorandum of understanding style agreement between LAFs, Natural England and Defra setting out their agreed roles and responsibilities.
- An annual training event probably held regionally rather than nationally, for the exchange of ideas, training and updates on current policy issues.
- A seat on the Rights of Way Review Committee offered to a LAF member at each meeting.

In conclusion I would just like to acknowledge the hard work of all Forums' members. I recognise that you all do this as volunteers, and your commitment and dedication to access work is much appreciated. In the future you will have a key role in not only delivering Government policy to your local communities, but working with Natural England, both nationally and regionally, to raise the access agenda. I am keen to ensure that the good work and knowledge that exists around the country is communicated to Government. This way best practice will be shared and problems addressed.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Richard Benyon." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

RICHARD BENYON MP