

MAKING OUR NEEDS KNOWN AND INFLUENCING DECISION MAKERS

DRAFT REPORT

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1. INTRODUCTION

England is a different place since the creation of Local Access Forums (LAFs) and the UK economy has changed significantly. Highway authority budgets have been reduced, which is having an effect on PRoW and countryside access. Natural England's resources have also been reduced which is affecting the support they provide to LAFs. However the LAFs workload continues to grow and have continued to advise decision making bodies on local countryside access issues. Issues have arisen where a number of LAFs have raised their concerns relating to the same subject, often of national importance to countryside access, independently or at their Regional Chairs meeting. Unfortunately Natural England, in some cases has not recognised these issues should be considered as matters of major importance. An example of this is permissive access in stewardship schemes, where the announcement of the ending of funding was made in 2010. LAFs were not given the opportunity to advise on this or have an input on examining alternative options. This report examines how LAFs could ensure future matters raised as issues which affect national countryside access, do not go unnoticed and are treated as important matters by Natural England and DEFRA.

2. GUIDANCE FOR LAFs IN ENGLAND

The extracts below, from the "Guidance on the roles of Local Access Forums in England" issued by the Secretary of State in 2007, support the need to pull together the views of all LAFs on issues of national significance.

In 3.4 Advising and influencing decision makers it is stated in 3.4.1 *"In giving advice, forums should aim to **influence** section 94(4) bodies and thereby contribute effectively to the quality and robustness of decision-making. Influence will be enhanced where a forum provides **independent, constructive, relevant, inclusive, incisive and informed** advice which takes account of a broad range and balance of local interests and which assists section 94(4) bodies in carrying out their functions. Forums should consider other ways to maximise the usefulness (and therefore impact) of their advice. For example, advice should be delivered at the optimum point in the decision-making cycle and in ways which recognise and take account of the decision-makers needs, objectives, constraints and role."*

In Annex C it provides examples of national, Section 94 bodies which include DEFRA, Natural England, Forestry Commission, Ministry of Defence, English Heritage and Sport England. Clearly although 3.4.1 specifies "local interests" the Guidance recognises that LAFs will be involved in and expected to advise on national access issues.

In 3.5.3 the guidance recognises *"Whilst all section 94(4) bodies are strongly encouraged to give feedback, forums should appreciate that these bodies will sometimes be constrained in providing detailed feedback. Also, for national bodies, there is the challenge of having to deal with over 80 forums throughout England, which means that they will need to be selective in accepting requests to*

attend forum meetings and may not have the capacity to enter into detailed correspondence, or to respond to requests for information on specific local issues. This is an inevitable reflection of the number of forums which the national bodies have to deal with, and does not mean that they give less weight to the advice received from a forum.”

In order to alleviate this issue one voice from all interested Access Forums would benefit recipients as well as promote the view of the Forums on national issues

In 3.6.1 proactively advising, it is stated *“Much forum work will inevitably be reactive and dependent on the timing of various initiatives or consultations. However, forums should adopt a proactive approach in setting their priorities and giving advice. Situations where a proactive approach can assist a section 94(4) body include giving “early warning” of a potential problem or identifying possible solutions to an issue from a novel or fresh perspective. A proactive approach can also increase a forum’s influence by enabling it to advise at an earlier stage in the decision-making process, before the options are narrowed down.”*

Thus, to enable the forums to proactively advise Section 94 bodies on national issues, the Guidance to LAFs supports the need to pull together the views of all forums in order to present as a single piece of advice to the relevant body. This should see the forums influence national policy development in relation to countryside access at the start and ensure that more workable and practical solutions are developed for a broad range of issues.

3. THE PROPOSAL

3.1. It is apparent that, when a matter is the concern of the majority of the LAFs, there is a need for a louder voice rather than a number of different LAFs saying the same thing to different people. With the loss of the LAF co-ordinators, Natural England’s reduced staffing levels and redefined role in the support of LAFs, it is necessary to look at how the LAFs can get their message over when it affects national policy. Examples of what could be considered national issues past, existing and future can be seen in appendix A. With 86 LAFs split into 8 regions it is difficult to have one voice (see appendix B).

3.2. The way forward may be to reinstate a modified form of the England Access Forum (EAF) to work on specific national and regional issues as the need arises. This may need a permanent administrative team to pull together a team to work on specific issues as they arise. A method of undertaking this task is displayed in appendix C. The method of funding the EAF is displayed in appendix D.

3.4. To ensure the LAFs have one voice on national and regional issues, it is important that a robust process is in place. This report describes one example of how this can be achieved. Other processes could be developed which are more effective. The South Lincolnshire and Rutland LAF together with its partner LAF’s (see appendix D), are investigating whether other LAF’s feel there is a need for “One Voice” and whether the process indicated is one which other LAFs support. It is felt that if this issue is left until another national or regional issue arises it will be too late to tackle it with a single voice. It is recognised that this report does not contain the detail required to adopt this process, as it is felt that if there is no interest in creating a “One Voice “ approach for national and regional countryside issues there is no need for this process.

Appendices

Appendix A – Examples of National & Regional Countryside Access Issues.

Appendix B – Breakdown of LAFs by region.

Appendix C – Suggested Process for Identifying a National Issue.

Appendix D – Method of Funding England Local Access Forum.

Appendix E – Partner LAFs.

Appendix F – Consultation Questionnaire.