

## Agenda Item 10c



**To: Jon Newman,  
Team Leader, Communities Team (SE West team)  
Natural England**

***'improving opportunities to enjoy  
Hampshire's countryside and coast'***

**[www.countrysideaccessforum.hants.org.uk](http://www.countrysideaccessforum.hants.org.uk)**

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*Reference:* Natural England support of LAFs

Cath Hart  
Officer to Hampshire Countryside Access Forum  
Rights of Way Office  
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Dear Mr Newman

### **REGIONAL SUPPORT FOR LOCAL ACCESS FORUMS AND ROLE OF THE NATIONAL FORUM**

I am writing on behalf of Hampshire Countryside Access Forum, the statutory Local Access Forum for Hampshire (excluding the New Forest), Portsmouth and Southampton. It is a joint Forum appointed by the three authorities of Hampshire County Council and Portsmouth and Southampton City Councils. **This letter is also supported by Kent Local Access Forum, Slough Local Access Forum and New Forest Access Forum, and I believe that you may shortly receive letters from other Forums in a similar vein.**

At our meeting on November 30<sup>th</sup> 2006 the Forum discussed the need for support from Natural England, and wish to make the following points:

- Natural England should support Local Access Forums at a regional level, guided by a national agreement
- The National Countryside Access Forum should be re-established as a national body for LAFs, enabling two-way dialogue

#### **Regional Support for Local Access Forums**

The 'Review of Local Access Forums' commissioned by the Countryside Agency and prepared by CCRU at the University of Gloucestershire last year concluded that among LAF members nationally "there is a fount of goodwill – LAF members are keen to be involved as shown in the motivations – but this goodwill is not unconditional and will decline over time unless LAFs achieve positive outcomes." (para 7.5). This is why regional support is so vital.

Experience over the last four years has shown that networking and training opportunities are highly valued by LAF members, enabling them to get a flavour of the work of their equivalents in other areas. This then informs each LAF and helps us to become more effective in influencing organisations and individuals – essentially, in doing the job that we were set up by Defra and Countryside Agency to do.

Over the last year under the Countryside Agency, support has varied considerably between regions, with only 2 of the 8 regions hosting an event for LAF members, and only 3 of the 8 producing a newsletter for LAF members – this even with a budget of £15,000 for LAF support in each region. There is currently no budget for LAF support under Natural England.

We would suggest that the requirements are:

- One event for LAF members annually in each region, to network and receive information about national agendas (eg coastal access)
- A call-off contract nationally for LAF member training which can be delivered regionally (eg. training for Chairs, consensus-building, being an effective LAF, and topic-based training)
- A newsletter twice annually in each region, with a round-up of national news and short reports from individual LAFs
- Recognition of the diversity of local access forums and the types of areas they serve

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We are pleased to hear that our regional contact will remain the same person, but are concerned that these contacts nationally are now in different teams within Natural England, with different remits and workloads. We feel that a national strategy should be agreed, to give clear direction to regional contacts and to ensure that their managers allow adequate time for the regional contact to carry this out. The strategy obviously needs to be accompanied by a budget, held either nationally or locally.

### **Role of the National Countryside Access Forum**

The 'Review of Local Access Forums' referred to above also found that LAF members felt very strongly that they needed a national body to communicate with on issues that were wider than their local area – for example, national policies or changes needed to legislation. This would avoid various local Forums approaching Defra or Natural England officers individually, and provide a co-ordinated approach to issues at a national level.

We understand that this has not been the role of NCAF to date but that their role, and even existence, is currently under review. We therefore would urge you to consider re-establishing NCAF in this role.

We would be pleased to assist in further discussion on either of these subjects.

Yours Sincerely

**Sue Coles**  
**Chair (2006), Hampshire Countryside Access Forum**

**Christopher Langford**  
**Chair (2007), Hampshire Countryside Access Forum**

**cc: Duncan MacKay, Recreation and Access Policy Principal Specialist, Natural England**  
**Jeremy Worth, Access Principal Specialist, Natural England**  
**Merrick Denton-Thompson, Board member representing the SE region, Natural England**