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Date: 1st June 2011  
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Dear Mr Benyon,

### **Leicestershire Local Access Forum**

Thank you for your letter of 5<sup>th</sup> April 2011 and your kind comments on the hard work of Access Forum members. Following the last meeting of the Leicestershire Local Access Forum held on 25<sup>th</sup> May members wished to formally support and reiterate my earlier comments.

In these are difficult times some cuts could be false economies and it is important that local views as represented on the forums have a channel into any debate nationally. It is therefore essential that a more workable system of two-way communication be set up between the forums and Natural England (NE), Defra and your Department.

Given the financial difficulties it is important that you take more advantage of voluntary contributors to the debate and it would help greatly if you would reinforce our role by reminding all levels of local authorities that we are there to help them and can be of very real assistance. Most LAFs have good relationships with Rights of Way and Transport departments of their appointing authorities but second-tier planning authorities rarely consult us and despite our best efforts most Parish Councils do not understand how we can help them. Further to this it is difficult at times to get other departments of the appointing authorities and the elected members to appreciate what we can offer.

Part of the problem with District and Borough Councils is that they see us as part of the higher authority and being very independent minded want to 'plough their own furrow'. LAFs differ around the country but many have no designated budget; have to meet as and when dictated by their appointing authority and if they do have any secretarial support it is a member of the staff of the higher authority who obviously wears two caps and whose first priority is the 'day job'. Were we to be able to exercise a little more independence from the appointing authority (and be seen so to do) other authorities should be happier to involve us.

Whilst still looking at what you can do to enhance our role or assist us in the aims we have been given by statute some simplification of the regulations as regards rights of way would speed up processes and save officers time and funds. Forums could perhaps play some role here as a first level tribunal or arbitration panel. All government departments look at their own issues without necessarily seeing them in the wider context which has, at the national level, been where the Lords as a reviewing chamber had a role. At a more local level in many aspects of local government

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activity there is no such oversight but Forums do play that role in areas within their remit which could possibly be expanded.

The population is becoming increasingly obese and generally unhealthy and when times are financially difficult one of the cheapest ways of keeping or getting fit is going for a walk. Neglecting the footpath network and indeed missing the opportunity to actually improve that network will cut down that possibility and whilst saving some money in rights of way departments, will add to the burden of the National Health Service. The answer to my mind is to delegate more responsibility to the voluntary sector and the Forums are well placed to organise this but they would need some funding as 'seed corn'.

It is worth also pointing out that the sort of people prepared to give of their time to be members of LAFs almost certainly are members of other voluntary organisations and by involving LAFs you also bring all those organisations into the loop albeit second hand. If you want to promote localism as part of your big society agenda you have a ready made organisation in place happy to take on a wider role. Can I respectfully suggest you take more advantage of us?

You do touch on training get-togethers. I am lukewarm on these. Once one is arranged NE tend to think of speakers etc to talk to us and much is talking down to members who are already well versed in such matters. Newer members can be brought up to speed by their more experienced colleagues. Where such gatherings do score well is the informal networking and idea swapping that goes on in the breaks. A virtual forum can go some way to addressing this need but cannot replace the way a debate evolves during face to face gatherings.

I would advocate annual regional seminars but with very little formal agenda and being more a brainstorming session to which all forum members can attend. The dictates of work and domestic responsibilities would suggest that not more than 3 or 4 from each Forum would attend so if kept within groupings of perhaps 8 to 10 forums these would not become unwieldy. Further to this though I do think Defra should host a similar but national exercise each year where Chairs of each Forum be invited and where senior officers and perhaps even yourself may attend. This would afford us a chance to share good practice and discuss common problems and concerns but would also give you a chance to outline current policy thinking or sound us out on possible policies.

You do suggest a LAF representative on each Rights of Way Review Committee Meeting. Certainly I would wish to be a part of that as I am sure would many of my colleagues but I am not sure how this would work as they could only speak for themselves and their own Forum as the forums have no structure of intercommunication and representation. Perhaps an alternative or addition would be for the minutes of all such meetings to be circulated to all LAF Chairs with them being invited to comment.

I also support twice yearly meetings of the Chairs within each Forum Grouping and I feel it best falls to NE to provide the modest secretarial support for such groupings, modest as it needs to be. This leads us into how do we best communicate other than any such gatherings.

I certainly feel that you need to nominate a named individual to whom we can refer all queries and concerns. I also feel that through that portal you can email all Chairs with any requests or enquiries although you will have to acknowledge that with the timings of our meetings some responses will have to be personal ones where time does not permit for discussion by the full Forum.

Funding issues locally means my Forum can only meet quarterly but we do try and keep in touch between meetings by email. Without any secretariat however any consultation requiring research will fall on the shoulders of individual volunteer members and usually the Chair

Yours sincerely,

Roy Denney  
Chairman  
Leicestershire Local Access Forum