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8<sup>th</sup> February 2010

Dear Fellow LAF Chair,

### **The England Access Forum**

I am writing on behalf of all those members of the England Access Forum who represent LAFs from all regions.

I do so with a mix of sadness and despair. You will have heard little from your regional representatives since EAF last met in June 2009 for a poorly managed meeting with Natural England.

Our energies have had to be devoted to the vital task of trying to ensure that EAF establishes its freedom to speak for the LAF family on the national scene. To achieve that, EAF needs sufficient resources (combined with a spartan approach to expenses) to enable LAFs' collective voice to be heard. Currently EAF has been offered nothing beyond the present princely sum of £4.5k per annum to cover what are agreed to be growing needs if EAF is to operate effectively. There has also been no secretariat support for EAF for most of last year. The inevitable conclusion is that all this is but a symptom of a wider lack of commitment by Natural England

There is little point in speculating about why the first 18 months for EAF has been so fraught. Natural England appears to find it hard to appreciate the value and potential of volunteers. There is a systemic problem in that on the one hand EAF, if doing its job, is bound to be constructively critical from time to time of Natural England, and on the other is dependent upon NE for pay and rations. It is important that EAF is more than simply a means of disseminating information.

Your EAF representatives have reluctantly concluded that nothing further is to be gained from protracted negotiations with our friends in Natural England – there have to be better ways of expending our energies and deploying our talents and expertise – and yours!

Before considering where to go from here we have to ask the honest question – is what we have achieved to date of real value to LAFs and access and what would be at risk if we were to give up the struggle? We have discussed the situation informally with a number of LAFs at regional meetings, asking for their views, and back has come a clear and heartening message:

Those LAFs do:

- want a national voice in the places that matter
- want to be able to influence policy formulation at the earliest stage as well as at the formal consultation
- wish to have a body capable of campaigning for access at the highest level
- want a means of raising front line issues which often pass unnoticed at government level
- need somewhere to turn to for advice and support when faced with problems
- want LAF representatives to have direct access to Ministers

Better still they felt that EAF was in its short life beginning to make a significant difference. Successes we can claim include:

- A Regional Framework for LAFs and Training budgets
- A start on raising the access profile nationally
- Getting LAF concerns raised at national level e.g. Gating orders, Rights of Way across new highways, establishing that LTPs have access as central duty, Livestock and Access problems, and Structures on Rights of Way.
- The LAF voice being heard at meetings with NE and at wider meetings – a distinctive contribution appreciated by single-interest group colleagues
- Bringing to bear front-line balance and expertise often missing at national meetings
- Ability to give advice at different levels from “all LAF” to early and informal consultation utilising the expertise of regions, EAF members and groups of LAFs
- DEFRA now approaches EAF first on proposed consultations to discuss best way of consulting
- Meetings with Ministers and Shadow Ministers

In the light of all that, we feel that we should not throw in the towel and wind up the EAF before it has had a real chance to find its feet – LAFs have too much to give to the benefit of the nation and the cause of furthering responsible access. What we offer comes at modest cost – a big consideration in these straitened times. We have proved that we bring an informed, distinctive and balanced perspective.

We have made up our minds to see if we can, with your support, develop an alternative approach, perhaps with DEFRA, which would give us freedom to act on behalf of the LAF family. Our conviction is that the loss of EAF now would be a blow to us all.

If EAF is to continue we need to know if you will support its aims, believing that:

- Access in all its aspects is vital – urban and rural, recreation, health, widening the range of users

- Balance and compromise is better than confrontation
- Access is a Cinderella service in the eyes of NE, DEFRA and politicians
- LAFs are key advocates for access

We would be grateful if you would contact your regional LAF representatives to tell them if you agree with EAF continuing and, if you do, to discuss how best you can support the campaign. For instance, you could set agenda items to discuss the merits of a LAF-led EAF, the necessity of LAF representation on the national stage, or even propose letters of support to Minister Huw-Irranca Davies or NE Chair Helen Phillips. If you are unsure who your representative is or how to contact them please contact me or your regional co-ordinator directly. We are considering how to approach Government and Opposition and how you can, if you wish, most effectively lobby MPs etc. This is not the worst time to be doing that and as a bonus we are bound to raise the profile of access at the right time!

I hope that we can all work together to stand up for our right to speak as one.

Best wishes

Duncan Graham CBE  
Chair of EAF and Cumbria LAF

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Dr Helen Phillips  
Chief Executive  
Natural England  
1 East Parade  
Sheffield  
S1 2ET  
8<sup>th</sup> February 2010

Dear Helen

**The England Access Forum**

It is with some sadness and regret that I am writing to you on behalf of the members of EAF who represent the LAFs from all the regions to say that they unanimously feel that the relationship with NE has arrived at a point where it would be right for us to reconsider the future of EAF.

I am sure that you have been made aware of the discussions that have been taking place for over a year concerning NE's support and funding of EAF, in the light of the wider role that we understood had been agreed with and was supported by NE. The members of EAF believe that our not being able to agree to the budgetary arrangements, where the sums involved are surely too modest to be a major obstacle, are but a symptom of a wider lack of commitment on NE's behalf to EAF and that it would be better, and more constructively healthy, for both parties if we were to rethink EAF's role and its relationship with NE.

To this end a meeting of EAF has been arranged in London on the 8th March for the members to discuss the Forum's future. We will let you know the time and place when the details have been finalised. If you feel that it would be helpful, we would be delighted if you were able to join us towards the end of the meeting to discuss the emerging plans. I attach a copy of a letter I have sent to Huw Irranca-Davies asking if he would be able to meet with us and I am sending him a copy of this letter.

I am sure that you can understand how disappointed my colleagues and I are that, after so much time and effort on our part we have not been able to achieve the honest and genuinely productive working relationship with NE that we had hoped for. I trust that we will be able to work together in the future to further the important access agenda and support the LAF family across the country.

Yours sincerely

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Huw Irranca-Davies MP  
Minister for Natural and Marine Environment Wild Life and Rural Affairs  
Nobel House  
17 Smith Square  
London  
SW1P 3ER

8<sup>th</sup> February 2010

Dear Minister

**The England Access Forum**

I am writing to you as Chair of EAF - you will remember that you kindly met Matthew Balfour and me on the 14<sup>th</sup> October last year to discuss the work of the Forum. Although we were able to share good news about EAF's achievements, we told you about the difficulties, as volunteers, that we were encountering with Natural England, and of the lengthy discussions which had occupied several months and so much of our energies. At that time you advised us to persevere which we have done. Since then discussions have centred on the basic financial and logistical help that is essential if EAF is to function effectively. The members of EAF believe that our not being able to agree to the budgetary arrangements, where the sums involved are surely too modest to present a major obstacle, are a symptom of a wider lack of commitment by Natural England.

It is with great regret that I have to tell you that these protracted discussions have not achieved a workable solution. There is more important work to be done to which we should be devoting our talents and expertise. The members of EAF have reluctantly decided that there needs to be a rethink about how EAF is to operate and how best to achieve its objective of providing LAFs with a national voice and in promoting access.

You will know that EAF represents all the 80+ Local Access Forums across England, through the regional network of Forums. There is gratifyingly strong support for EAF from LAFs who want EAF to ensure that their collective voice is heard and to be a place at which matters of national importance to do with the access agenda can be aired. There is also strong support from the LAFs for EAF to use its national position to promote the LAF family and lobby for its aims, which of course reflect a balanced view on how best access can further the government agenda while respecting the views of all concerned and encouraging responsible behaviour by users. I believe that you acknowledged this during the debate over Coastal Access in Parliament. The members of EAF have come to the conclusion that it is not possible for EAF to properly fulfil this role under the present arrangements with NE and is meeting to discuss how best to continue its important work in London on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March. We will let you know the time and the place when the details have been finalised. It is inevitable that DEFRA will have a view on whatever is the outcome and it would be of enormous support to the whole LAF family

of volunteers if you were able to join the meeting for a few minutes to both tell the members of your hopes and plans for access in the widest sense and also to perhaps hear what the members of EAF see as the way forward?

I attach a copy of a letter I have written to Dr Helen Phillips and I have sent her a copy of this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Duncan Graham CBE  
Chair of EAF and Cumbria LAF