

Chair's comments to members re EAF

Natural England and the England Access Forum are currently discussing future working arrangements and as you are aware present arrangements have proved fractious. It was always intended to review progress after two years but it coincides with the break down of present arrangements and a new government and new funding of QUAGOS etc. They are now seeking our views as the Statutory Access Forum for Leicestershire.

I do think links between Natural England and LAFs regionally have been good but with the freeze on recruitment it seems highly unlikely that we will see much of their remaining one responsible officer in the future.

They are seeking in particular our views on

- The links between EAF and the LAFs through the regional coordinators.
- The effectiveness of the links between LAFs and Natural England at a national level through EAF.
- The added value that a national body representing LAFs can bring.
- The options for EAF's development.

I support the view of most LAF Chairs that the wealth of experience and knowledge within the Local Access Forums is invaluable and underutilised and I believe that the England Access Forum has a major role to play representing the LAFs at the national level to Government, Natural England and other national bodies. To be effective however the EAF has to be properly resourced and independent of NE as the views of the two bodies will not agree on all issues.

Also to be effective the chain of reporting and representation has to be more focused. As far as I can tell the arrangements vary widely across the country. I think the model adopted in the East Midlands still holds good but it has not been as effective as it might have been due to NE and the EAF not getting their acts together.

We have two reps and decided that one should be constant in the interests of continuity but that the other should revolve around the Area Chairs giving recognition, however, that on occasion an agenda item might make it more useful for one particular Chair to go regardless of whose turn it is. Lincolnshire was the obvious East Mids. forum when coastal access was being discussed.

We conceived that if EAF were to meet on a regular basis, we should meet midpoint between those meetings so that reps could report back and we could make our views know on agenda items. Unfortunately dates of their meeting constantly changed making nonsense of these intentions on our part and their agenda came out far too late for meaningful discussion at our end. If they get a regular pattern established and get agendas out timely our system can still work well.

Lack of proper regional consultation leaves the door open for so called reps to plough their own furrows and there have been concerns expressed that it was not always clear whether delegates at the EAF meetings were mandated by their region or representing their personal views. Our rep had been particularly concerned by the series of email exchanges which had taken place between EAF members between the agenda being distributed and the meeting date. We are all agreed that this was inappropriate and needs resolving if the system is to work.

EAF want our views and I welcome those of the rest of the forum but given my close involvement I am obviously closer to the situation than anybody else and as such I am happy that these views be passed on by our Forum if you are all happy with them.

RJD