

## **REPORT ON: ENGLAND ACCESS FORUM (EAF) AND NATURAL ENGLAND**

### **1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

The purpose of the report is to provide updates on the situation with the England Access Forum and the South East Region for members' discussion/information.

### **2. UPDATES**

**2.1** The Slough Local Access Forum responded on 28<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010 (see Appx 1) to the EAF/Natural England survey. The survey of all LAF's nationally sought 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.

**2.2** News received via email on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2010 from the regional co-ordinator confirmed that: Andy Mackintosh (Natural England Secretary to the England Access Forum) made the following statement regarding the current position of the England Access Forum...

"The review findings have been collated and we are hoping to agree a way forward with the England Access Forum as to their analysis and distribution. Meanwhile Natural England is considering its response to Duncan Grahams' requests for Natural England commitment of financial support for 2011/12 and a meeting with the Chief Executive."

**2.3** A further email received on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010 stated that the South East LAF Conference that had been planned for 15<sup>th</sup> Feb 2011 in London is now CANCELLED due to no more funds available from Natural England.

**2.4** The following note from EAF Chairman, Duncan Graham was also received on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010.

Dear Colleagues,

#### **Future of the England Access Forum**

You will recall that I sent an email on 5<sup>th</sup> November to the Chair and Chief Executive of Natural England asking for a meeting within two weeks to resolve questions about the future which have dragged on interminably. There is proof that the email has been received and read.

Sadly, I have received neither a response nor the courtesy of an acknowledgment. We must draw our own conclusions.

There has been no progress on the joint analysis of the submissions made by LAFs, beyond the conclusion that the vast majority of those LAFs which responded would like to see EAF as a Forum to represent their views at national level and to champion access. There has been no assurance of adequate support or continuity.

That LAFs do not seem to figure in the thinking of NE can be deduced from a letter sent out on the 16<sup>th</sup> November by Helen Phillips arrestingly entitled “transferring delivery of our access and engagement related work to civil society”. We were not amongst the consultees. A brave new world is postulated but apparently with no place for Local Access Forums.

What is frustrating is that there has never been a better or more appropriate time for the voice of LAFs to be heard and their advice heeded. LAFs have so much practical advice to offer on how best to mitigate the effects of major reductions in expenditure and views which deserve to be heard regarding the potentially most damaging of the outcomes.

LAFs and regions have been asking for EAF to lead a national response on topics including:

- Working with government and the Forestry Commission to find the best ways to bring about change while minimising the impact on recreation and the environment
- The major impact on access of the withdrawal of funds from the HLS schemes
- The next generation of Rights of Way Improvement Plans in the current financial climate
- The impact of budget reductions on the work of Highway Authorities and the backlogs of DMMOs, prospect of forced mergers and staff losses etc.

In a letter following our September meeting with the Minister (contrast the Chair of NE), Richard Benyon MP, he recognises the significant contribution that LAFs and EAF have to make to improving access.

There is nothing more I can do!

Best wishes

Duncan Graham

### 3. Appendix 1 – Slough LAF Response to EAF/Natural England Survey

28<sup>th</sup> September 2010

## Slough Local Access Forum

Andrew Mackintosh  
Natural England Secretary to the England  
Access Forum

Replies to: Officer to Slough Local Access Forum  
Highways Engineering  
Slough Borough Council  
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Slough, SL1 3UQ

By email.

Tel: 01753 477 479  
Fax: 01753 875 660  
Email: [Localaccessforum@slough.gov.uk](mailto:Localaccessforum@slough.gov.uk)  
Ref: EAF/NE Survey Response

Dear Andrew,

On behalf of the Slough Local Access Forum, please see the following response to the consultation “Review of the England Access Forum”, contents agreed by members at the Forum meeting held on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

Overall the forum felt that the value of the EAF can only be positive as it allows LAF's an opening where generic issues of local concern can be taken forward to the national level. (eg; Gating Orders)

The EAF can bring local issues to the fore on a national level with dialogue developing from individuals with the same agenda as the local members. That agenda is the improvement of access for all, real involvement with local communities and partnership working across the health, business and user groups agendas.

Communication links are vital if the hierarchical structure of the LAF's and role of the EAF is to be successful. This calls for close working practices between LAF co-ordinators and LAF officers in individual authorities and the regional and national Natural England offices. Members felt that the regional structure needed to be maintained, with the existence of the England Access Forum helping provide the rationale allowing regional gatherings to have an impact at a higher level, rather than ending with shared practice alone. It was thought that EAF would have difficulty functioning without regional communication.

To best represent all Local Access Forums the EAF ought to operate autonomously as all LAF's do, or try to do. The EAF cannot be placed within or be financially dependent on another organisation if the influence it could achieve is to be truly representative of the local opinion it springs from.

Funding of the EAF ought to be via Defra, as the individual appointing authorities are already asked to fund individual LAF's and the EAF will provide a valuable consultation asset during the drafting stage of new policy. In the long term there is the potential for the EAF along with Natural England to help make the process of drafting new policy more effective and efficient in terms of being in closer contact with local opinion.

Yours sincerely,

Jacqui Wheeler  
Slough LAF Support Officer