

REPORT REFERENCE:- **5.0**

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Richard Benyon MP  
Minister of State for Natural Environment and Fisheries

Dear Mr. Benyon,

#### REPLY TO YOUR LETTER TO LOCAL ACCESS FORUM CHAIRS

I'm replying rather belatedly to your circular letter to Local Access Forum chairs, which you sent on 5 April. The long delay has at least given me plenty of opportunity to consult with my LAF members and other chairs of LAFs in my region.

Your letter was most welcome, for you express views over several key areas of our work which strongly accord with our own. In particular, you mention the need for clarity in the links between central government and its agencies, and individual LAFs. Our experience is that LAFs have been able to work very well together at regional level (with the help only of only a very part time paid co-ordinator). The reasons for this are probably twofold: firstly there are not too many LAFs within a region for easy direct communication, and secondly that in the East Midlands, our region, geography and economy give us very similar conditions and problems and opportunities. We thus tend to share common aims and face common difficulties.

This is not to imply any particular support for the erstwhile regional organisation of government, but only that for our purposes this particular regional alliance works. We do find it very useful to share views with each other independently of our commissioning authorities, and we think this is healthy.

We also share your view that there is a need for all local authorities with each LAF's area to be aware of our statutory role with respect to them, and for them to view this as something which can assist them positively. A particular concern is that planning authorities are effectively unaware of our existence, let alone our role. Their decisions have a major impact on access to the countryside and bad decisions by them frequently cause long term problems. We believe we could and should play a useful role in helping the avoid

conflicts and make more informed decisions in a way which would improve their efficiency.

To respond to the four specific points given under bullets in your letter:

First point (virtual forum for LAF members)

As a means of sharing objectives and disseminating best practice, we would welcome this. It is particularly useful to know of the experience of other LAFs, and what measures have been tried elsewhere. Knowing a problem is widely shared is a great spur to getting it resolved, and where problems occur widely, they are real and the more public benefit can be gained from solving them.

Second point (Memorandum of understanding)

It all depends what was in such a memorandum. If this is a good idea it would be by making everyone involved actually think about this. I suspect this would reveal a power struggle, with Defra and Natural England trying to make LAFs less independent and "tame", while LAFs sought the opposite. A debate might be interesting.

Third point (Annual training event)

The same point could be made as under the second point, in that if the training was in the hands of the national bodies, it would be slanted towards restricting and taming LAFs, where their real benefit can only come from them being independent and original in their thought. The question is, who would provide the training?

Fourth point (A seat on rights of way review committee)

Few people in LAFs would want to say no to this, but it does pose the question of how the occupant of the seat would be chosen. It would have to be something between an appointment made by an external agent (the minister?), which would appear unrepresentative, and something requiring a full-blown representative democracy set up for LAFs to choose the person. Neither of these extremes is appealing. This is not to reject the idea at all. I for one would hope that a satisfactory method of appointment could be found.

In conclusion, thank you for your kind words for our efforts as volunteers. I have fairly wide experience of voluntary committee work. At a personal level my LAF work has been rewarding because LAFs actually work as committees should. That is, with honest and genuine exchanges of views, followed by members working to thrash out common ground and a united view. Surprisingly often we do this with ease, because we see obvious practical answers to many of the problems we face. Of course the authorities don't always agree with us.

Yours sincerely  
Christopher Padley  
Chair, Mid-Lincolnshire Local Access Forum