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All Local Access Forum (LAF) Chairs  
*[By email]*

14 February 2012

**From Richard Benyon MP**  
Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries

Dear Chairs

On 5 April 2011 I wrote to all Local Access Forums setting out 4 proposals for the improvement of information flow between Forums, Natural England and Defra. I asked Forums to consider and comment on the proposals I put forward – it is pleasing to find that all 4 suggestions were broadly supported, with two of the proposals proving significantly popular with respondents.

The proposals were:

**An annual training event probably run regionally rather than nationally** - This proposal was positively received. It is good to see that Forums recognise the value of networking outside regional boundaries and appreciate opportunities to learn from each other, share good practice and discuss common issues. I understand there are two events now planned for February and March and I look forward to hearing how they go.

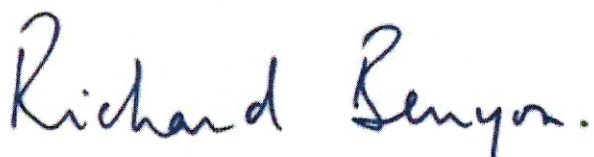
**A virtual forum for LAF members** - The idea of an on-line networking site for Forums was positively received. Some Forums expressed a desire to follow a hierarchical system of information flow and engagement rather than a cross-region, cross-issue method of working and reporting. There were concerns with the practicalities of on-line working. However, a pilot scheme using 'Huddle' technology is already underway, and proving popular – it's good to see Forums keen to work together and to explore new ways to communicate between Natural England and Defra. Huddle offers effective ways of supporting Forums into the future that Forums are welcome to take up, but also can abstain from.

**A Memorandum of Understanding style agreement between Defra Natural England and Forums** - Support for this idea was more muted than for other proposals. This seems to be, in part, because it wasn't clear to Forums what form the agreement would take or how it would be agreed. The role of Forums is set out in statute, and the understanding Forums have of their statutory basis varies. However, the role Defra and Natural England play in supporting Forums is not prescribed and a formal agreement may help all parties know what they should expect from each other.

**A seat on the Rights of Way Review Committee** - Some LAFs expressed doubts about Forums as local, independent bodies, being represented by ordinary Forum members, although Forum members have shown they are keen to have the opportunity to attend higher level meetings. There is no single national 'LAF view' and Forums should focus on the issues affecting their own areas, but Forum members being able to see policy making at a national level and feed back their experiences I think is very useful.

I am aware of how successful Forums are in carrying out their duties and in involving themselves in improving local quality of life. I put forward these proposals because I see them as key ways to help Local Access Forums continue to be effective and valuable players in the access agenda. Defra has tasked Natural England with improving the way Forums are supported and I am pleased to say that Natural England has committed resources to both improving communication and support. There is great deal of important work for Local Access Forums to be involved in and I want to help that happen.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Richard Benyon." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**RICHARD BENYON MP**