

Duncan Graham (Cumbria) who was mainly responsible for cajoling NE into creating such a forum acted as an excellent interim chairman, and was subsequently elected as full Chairman. James Marsden, Executive Director of Policy and Evidence, introduced the meeting and provided the lead for the half-a-dozen(?) NE officers who are members of the Forum. He made it clear that he has a remit to cut costs severely. The Minutes of the meeting will be available in due course but it may be helpful if, representing you as chairmen, I offer some comments on particular issues direct. Please feel free to pass these on to your members if you so wish. Unfortunately, Claire and I did not have the opportunity to discuss our relative representative roles, and her non-chairman perspective may reflect different facets or priorities. This could be helpful in gaining a balanced view of proceedings.

In advance of the meeting I had suggested that the amorphous acronym EAF could, with a little imagination, be bettered, possibly including "Countryside", after the Act which empowers us. NE, supported by some members, adamantly disagreed and rather than spend valuable time on further discussion, but despite an example of a prospective immigrant's request for assistance, we stuck with England Access Forum.

The briefings by the NE officers leading various projects (Amanda Earnshaw on Lost Ways, Terry Robinson on the Review of National Trails and Routes, and Paul Johnson on Coastal Access) were useful, and we were given ample opportunity to pose questions and make comments. Amanda reported that the Lost Ways project is closing down to be replaced with a Stakeholder Working Group. Terry advised that NE is aiming for "more people, more active, more often" which may be better delivered in the urban fringes (obesity barns?); there was a strong hint that RoWs are no longer flavour of the month. Paul noted that, on contentious coastal access issues, one landowner had already asked the local Forum to arbitrate.

The Minutes should provide greater detail, but two issues aroused particularly strong feelings from members:

first, NE had no plans to make money available for regional co-ordination, despite the draft constitution stating that "regional co-ordinators have a key role to play". Indeed, the draft Constitution stated only that "...regional development ... will be explored", which we did manage to change to "encouraged". Pending (hopefully) reconsideration by NE, Hilary has now relinquished her regional role.

second, James Marsden was adamant that NE would not provide any printed copies of the Handbook under any circumstances. This is due to the emphasis on cost-cutting, and (of course) on their concern about their "green footprint" - which will thus be passed on for local authorities to shoulder. A useful mixed metaphor if you accept that their footprint is on our shoulders.

Please do not hesitate to contact me when you have received the Minutes, but it seems there is no prospect of regional meetings in the foreseeable future.

Bob Harvey