

NOTES on the meeting with Chris Marrow, Regional Manager Forestry Commission, Haldon Forest Park, 28 July 2008. Chairmen of all Access Forums in the South West Region were invited.

Chairmen in attendance	Robin Moore	Cornwall
	Joanna Radford	Dartmoor
	Terry Faull	Devon
	Oliver Chamberlain	Dorset
	Mike Amos	North Somerset
	Ray Fairchild	Plymouth
	Alistair Gordon	Somerset
	John Gibson	Torbay
	Bob Harvey	SW Regional Rep. & Devon Co-chairman
	Apologies	Jeremy Holtom
	Ray Newbiggin	Joint LAF
	Claire Stuckey	SW Regional Rep.
Observers	Colin Jones	Natural England
	Hilary Winter	ex-Regional Secretary

Haldon Forest Park is a highly successful national example of how public access for leisure activities can be combined with commercial forestry - if sufficient (public) funds are available. It is large enough to be able to segregate various activities, and is particularly successful in attracting all groups of cyclists, children and parents for limited risk play activity, and disillusioned teenagers. The last group has been successfully targeted by a special outreach warden, and the teenagers are now encouraging their previously inactive parents to join them.

Two main problems have arisen as a result of its success :

- i. although only 2-3 miles from Exeter there is no convenient bus service so cars have to be used to gain access.
- ii. there is no restaurant so visitors cannot easily stay a full day without either a picnic or driving out of the park. A restaurant which will serve local healthy food is now being designed and will soon be built.

The tour of facilities was scheduled to take an hour, but easily extended to over an hour and a half.

The Chairmen of the **South West Access Forums (SWAFs)** for short) then held a meeting loosely chaired by Bob Harvey.

Points arising from EAF meeting :

- 1 Funds for regional co-ordination are essential if representatives are to represent.
- 2 The Handbook should be in printed form so that Natural England's (NE) carbon footprint does not fall on the shoulders of local authorities. If the argument is financial, this should be acknowledged and the alternative money-saving strategies discussed openly with EAF members.
- 3 Bob Harvey reiterated his personal conviction that the term "Countryside" should have been included in the EAF title as Forums hold their statutory status **only** under the CRow Act which is enacted "to make new provision for public access to the countryside;". Advice on issues not covered in the Act (e.g. health, urban improvement) cannot assume statutory support.
- 4 Bob Harvey also noted that NE is a 94/4 body and is therefore required to "have regard" to advice from Forums through EAF.

Issues raised at EAF and subsequently :

- 1 NE must be transparent about its agenda : has its reluctance to initiate EAF been due to economies or uncertainty about its ability to contribute to the "more people, more active, more often"

health agenda? If economies are to be made, Forums - through EAF - should be involved in decisions.

2 Some Forums have serious problems with their local authorities which attempt to restrict the independence and funding of the Forums. In Torbay, the council is selling off its Green Spaces and will not pass information to the Forum. The establishment of independent Forums is a statutory responsibility under the CRoW Act and there needs to be a chain of complaint which lead right back via the EAF then NE then DEFRA to the Audit Commission.

3 Public transport is a core problem (see above) which may contribute to the decline in public use of the countryside. Haldon is a case in point, and the imminence of two new towns in Devon, with little provision for public transport, is of major concern. An associated issue is the problem of basic and cheap accommodation (e.g. Youth Hostels) on long distance trails.

4 The possibility of sub-regional groups for SWAFs was raised but deferred in the hope that NE will find funds, perhaps from other sources, for meetings in Taunton.

Issues raised by chairmen

1 A **"State of ..."** report on local authority support, activities of Forums, and RoWIPs should be drawn up from a simple questionnaire. This will provide a starting point for standards. For RoWs the South West Coast Path could be the basis with ease of use (e.g. gate latches, signs, stock in fields) being assessed by users, not providers. Somerset and Torbay could lead on this.

2 **Agri-environment schemes should be better used** by bringing public access into ELS not restrictive HLS, and payments should be at a level which provides a positive, commercial incentive. This will help Coastal Access. Funds can be found without extra cost by reallocation from the existing SPS budget so that landowners as a whole do not lose subsidies outside farming.

3 Close co-ordination between EAF and FARE is essential.

NE DRAFT Recreation Policy

1 This is wholly "Govspeak". What is the intended audience? If only Government, then there should also be a public-friendly version. (The South Hams Public Space Strategy provides an excellent example BH).

2 "Evidence" is generally comment, with little factual evidence.

3 Policies 1 Yes but to get people away from towns see references to disillusioned youth and public transport above, and 3 below.

2 Generally yes; see agri-environment comment above.

3 Yes - see notes above. Also note that people on holiday want to stay away from urban areas and (as noted towards the end of the Draft) satisfy their "love of nature and landscape" in the Natural environment.

4 Yes - more assertive and better rewarded; see above.

5 Yes - see notes above on transport and accommodation; publicity on economic value public access on National Trails should be directed to users and to landowners.