

ENGLAND ACCESS FORUM
Meeting on 23 September 2008

The meeting started promptly, it was well chaired by Duncan Graham (Cumbria) with James Marsden at his side, and finished promptly. Claire Stuckey was unable to attend and her place was taken by Alistair Gordon. After the robust debates of the May meeting this was much more subdued and better controlled. The working group, as is their brief, supported the chair.

The Minutes, taken by Peter Ashcroft, will be circulated soon but this is the fast-track feedback I promised. Both Alistair and I will be able to comment more fully in person at a regional meeting.

Some form of regional support for LAFs appears assured, but the proposed method of delivery needs a great deal of refinement to be effective. Hilary submitted four points of concern which I raised, and these were similar to issues raised by other members. With effective regional co-ordination, the role of regional representatives will, it seems, become mainly that of commenting on papers at the EAF meetings and reporting back to their regions, with little opportunity for regular interactive feedback from LAFs. With less than seven hours of meeting time per year it seems unlikely that there will be much time for agenda items raised by the regions.

The Review of Trails and Routes was an excellent presentation from Peter Ashcroft, and is of particular relevance to the South West in view of the large number of such routes in the region.

The Access Policy has metamorphosed from the Draft Recreation Policy and is now available on the Natural England website. The England Access Forum is listed as a consultee but the response was in fact confidential within the working group and has not been revealed to or ratified by the whole Forum. It was confirmed that this is now a public document, and LAFs will soon be able to comment.

The Ministry of Defence proposal for training on Access land in Cumbria had not been cross-checked with, for example, Dartmoor or Wiltshire. Chairmen of those Forums may wish to check if any similar proposals exist in their areas so that their views, as well as Cumbria, may be represented.

The paper on Constitution changes concerning the status of Natural England officers on EAF was agreed, as - despite certain historical inaccuracies - was the Chairman's paper on the Working Group. I had agreed to leave Alistair to speak to the proposals submitted by South West forums on 11 September to the Secretary and again on 21 September to individual representatives, and the meeting was given the opportunity to comment. Nobody spoke so the paper was dismissed. This appears to be a tacit decision, by all other members, that the Secretary of State's "Guidance" is not relevant, and EAF will continue to be run as now, i.e.

there will be no elected vice-chairman;

the term of office for the chair remains unlimited;

the working group will be appointed by the chair and have unique privileges;

the working group will handle inter-meeting business in confidence with Natural England;

the working group members must accept absolute confidentiality within that group, or leave;

there will be no list of EAF members, showing interests etc., drawn up and circulated widely.

I feel it is unfortunate that not one of the South West proposals was supported, although right at the end of the meeting the chairman did indicate that he might consider making one or two concessions on details such as wider circulation of non-confidential e-mails. It seems we now have to accept that we are out of step with the rest of England - it must be something in South West Water!

Best wishes,

Bob Harvey.