

Date: 16 November 2010  
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Your ref:

The logo for Natural England, featuring the words "NATURAL" and "ENGLAND" stacked vertically in a white, sans-serif font. The text is set against a solid yellow rectangular background.

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Dear Colleague

### **UPDATE ON PROGRESS: TRANSFERRING DELIVERY OF OUR ACCESS AND ENGAGEMENT AND RELATED WORK TO CIVIL SOCIETY**

As a major tenet of thinking in the new coalition government, the 'Big Society' provides the backdrop to a number of the challenges set out to the public sector in relation to supporting the growth of civil society and active communities. As you may be aware, Natural England is (in line with Cabinet Office advice) examining all its functions to test where and how Big Society principles could be applied in order to:-

- Give communities more powers
- Encourage people to take an active role in their communities
- Transfer power from central to local government
- Support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises
- Provide more open access to Government data

Initially, we have looked to identify opportunities for civil society to be more actively involved in delivery of our work to further the engagement of people with the natural environment. We have based this examination on a set of guiding principles (see attached) and the clear premise that inspiring people to value and conserve the natural environment remains central to our remit and delivery of all of our outcomes. More specifically, we also see opportunities to transfer assets which currently support the delivery of our public engagement work relating to:-

1. National Nature Reserves.
2. One Million Children Outdoors Programme – public outreach focused on families and children of school age
3. Walking for Health
4. Volunteering
5. Statutory access work and provision of new access (access to open country, new coastal access and the creation and ongoing management of National Trails)

The approach we have taken to developing proposals is through open and active dialogue with our partners. Although you may already be involved in some of these discussions, we thought it might be useful to see the scope of this work so a short summary of the proposals and progress to date is appended to this letter

We recognise these are just first steps in developing our role in supporting the development of a thriving and vibrant civil society. We know we have much to learn and want to maintain a dialogue with some of our voluntary and community sector partners as this work develops.

In recognition of this, our Board recently held a workshop with civil society representatives as an opportunity for us to listen to our partners about what works, challenge us on our current proposals and advise us on the best way forward. The workshop highlighted a number of important issues to be addressed to help make our contribution to a building a thriving civil society successful. These included resourcing, the capacity of the voluntary sector to respond quickly and how voluntary organisations can work together better. Natural England was identified as having a leadership role as expert adviser and honest broker, adding value through expertise and branding.

Having agreed an initial Joint Statement of Intent with the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency ([http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/3rd-sector-statement\\_tcm6-14700.pdf](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/3rd-sector-statement_tcm6-14700.pdf)), we will now be working together in developing approaches to working with the voluntary and community sector and this will be reflected in our respective Civil Society Action Plans. We are very grateful for the contribution that many of you have made already to our thinking and would very much like this collaboration to continue as we develop our delivery plans.

I hope that this helps explain our current thinking – it is very much ‘work in progress’ but we will endeavour to keep you informed as it develops. In the meantime, if you have any queries on our current proposals for the five work areas listed above, please contact Pippa Langford (tel: 07900 608374) or Joy Smart (0300 060 1761) if you have more general questions about Natural England’s engagement with civil society.

Yours sincerely

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

Helen Phillips  
Chief Executive

## APPENDIX 1 : QUICK UPDATE ON PROGRESS IN TRANSFERRING DELIVERY OF ACCESS AND ENGAGEMENT TO CIVIL SOCIETY

### 1. **National Nature Reserves (NNR):**

Natural England manages 140 NNRs across England. Many of our NNRs already encourage active involvement of local communities and other groups of people through conservation volunteering and outreach activity in addition to collaborative work with the voluntary sector. Beyond this, Natural England is investigating options for the ownership and management of its estate with the objectives of increasing opportunities for participation by civil society organisations and local communities and delivering public sector efficiencies.

So far, Natural England has held discussions with a number of organisations that manage other parts of the NNR network in order to understand the potential opportunities and challenges around different options. We now want to engage a wider set of interests in developing options and solutions further including those representing local communities. We aim for a new delivery model to be rolled out between 2011 and 2014.

In the meantime, we plan to take forward a programme of more immediate measures that increase the role of Big Society in parts of our NNR estate such as increasing local community participation in managing our NNRs.

### 2. **One Million Children Outdoors Programme:**

Natural England's One Million Children Outdoors programme has primarily used our estate (eg National Nature Reserves) and resources to offer opportunities for 1 million school children to experience high quality natural environment by 2013. These aspects of the Programme are delivered with and through partners and have also been funded through Environmental Stewardship.

As part of the Programme, Natural England also hosted and managed the **Big Wildlife Garden website** ([www.bwg.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.bwg.naturalengland.org.uk)) launched in September 2009. The Big Wildlife Garden is an online, interactive source of information and advice on wildlife gardening, together with an accreditation scheme which encourages and rewards individuals, schools, private or public bodies such as hospitals, allotment owners or community groups like Cubs and Scouts to transform their garden or open green space into a haven for wildlife.

Finally, Natural England has sponsored and managed the **Cub Scout and Scout Naturalist badge** for the past two years as part of our One Million Children Outdoors Programme. Sponsorship of the badge represents an opportunity to engage with a large sector of the youth population in the UK who are actively involved in outdoor activities and education. The Scout Association badges are a popular and traditional way in which Cub Scouts and Scouts engage with activities provided by their local troop.

Natural England intends to transfer to partners from civil society the sponsorship of the Cub Scout and Scout badge; ownership and management of the Big Wildlife Garden website; and aspects of the Educational Access outreach programme. So far, we have invited partners to 'express an interest' in the Cub and Scout Badge and the Big wildlife Garden website. A similar Expression of Interest for Educational Access work will be sent out in the near future.

### 3. **Walking for Health**

Walking for Health was developed to make it easier for people to get in closer contact with nature while also benefiting their health. Natural England currently facilitates this national programme of local walking schemes running community-led health walks, providing cascade training, accreditation, evaluation and insurance. Schemes are funded and delivered by local partnerships (eg local authorities, primary care trusts, charities, business) with walks led by volunteers

Within the timescale of the 11/12 Spending Round, the aim would be to:-

- Secure a sustainable future for the Walking for Health network, protecting investment to date and ensuring continued delivery of health and environmental outcomes

- Strengthen links between health and environment and between business and voluntary sector providers to offer a wider choice of opportunities close to local communities
- Engage a wider range of partners in this work, including private sector companies
- Transfer any direct delivery of Walking for Health currently undertaken by Natural England to the voluntary sector

Successfully embedding the delivery of Walking for Health in the community as a free standing entity requires a support framework within which to operate. Having held meetings with some of our stakeholders (private sector, NGOs, DEFRA and Dept of Health) in September and October (where there was unanimous support for Walking for Health to continue in some form), we are seeking views of those currently involved in Walking for Health at all levels to inform us about what might be needed to make this work in practice.

#### **4. Volunteers:**

The Home Office defines volunteering as “*an activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that **aims to benefit the environment** or individuals or groups other than close relatives*”. The emerging Big Society agenda presents us with exciting opportunities to empower communities of place and interest to make decisions, take responsibility and deliver action that is right for them. This community determination will need easy access to expert advice and support and a cohort of enthusiastic and committed volunteers to make it a reality. Natural England and other environmental sector partners need to find new and inspiring ways to further engage individuals, communities and organisations to help deliver shared environmental goals in a more cost effective and integrated way.

Although we have been facilitating some regional volunteering partnerships, we want to explore a more localised approach with a range of existing and new partners. Working with and through the Defra family we want to explore an integrated approach to environmental volunteering that is more cost effective, shares resources and expertise and makes it easier for people to take action for their local communities. We are already working with Defra and the national Environmental Volunteering Group to consider how we might collaborate on delivering Big Society and Defra’s continuing aspiration to increase environmental volunteering and build capacity within the sector. We have already agreed that supporting local groups and civil society organisations to more effectively increase their volunteering base is a priority.

#### **5. Statutory Access and new access infrastructure**

In terms of the statutory access work, Natural England has specific duties and powers under relevant legislation (National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, CROW 2000, Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009) to deliver on these areas of work. While any change in these specific powers and duties would require primary legislation or a change in regulation, we will be looking at ways in which civil society organisations and local communities can help in providing access.

For **National Trails**, we are responsible for proposing new national trails to the Secretary of State and for proposing necessary variations as the need arise. We currently work closely in partnership with local authorities who deliver the maintenance and construction on the ground. This often already involves others such as ‘Friends of’ groups and volunteers. Building on our earlier Policy review of Routes and Trails and within the timescale of the 11/12 spending round, our aim is to establish a more sustainable delivery model for national trails. We will want to consult and work with our voluntary sector partners in carrying out this review as well as building on the many existing good practice examples of local partnerships.

## APPENDIX 2: NATURAL ENGLAND'S APPROACH TO BIG SOCIETY - PRINCIPLES

In considering the opportunities and assessing the emerging solutions, we have proposed the following seven tests or principles:

- **Benefit to communities:** optimises benefits to communities of locality and interest, and supports them to get involved and take action.
- **Consistent quality of outcomes:** always looks for long-term sustainable practical outcomes – delivered locally but nationally coherent.
- **Stronger partnerships:** builds stronger partnerships with communities and all of civil society
- **Natural environment benefits:** ensures natural environment benefits and demonstrates them to civil society
- **Makes best use of civil society and business:** benefits from the skills, knowledge and capacity of the whole of society, alongside those of our public and business partners, securing community responsibility and ownership alongside Natural England's purposes.
- **Enabling new investment and resourcing:** transferring services to sustainable business models, thereby increasing the range of funding sources for the long term.
- **Participative decision making**  
Decision making processes are open, transparent and fair. Information is put into the public domain to inform all participants. Consultations enable constructive participation.