



Joint Local Access Forum (JLAF)

for Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol City and South Gloucestershire

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By email to: forestrypanel@defra.gsi.gov.uk

Secretariat to the Independent Panel on Forestry
c/o Defra
Area 5E
Nobel House, 17 Smith Square
London SW1P 3JR

Thursday, 28th July 2011

Dear Rt Reverend Bishop James Jones,

Call for views by the Independent Panel on Forestry

This letter constitutes formal advice from the Joint Local Access Forum (JLAF) for Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol City and South Gloucestershire, in accordance with section 94(5) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

The Joint Local Access Forum for Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol City and South Gloucestershire (JLAF) is a statutory body set up under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to advise Local Authorities, the Government and others on public access to the outdoors. Our 22 volunteer members are drawn from landowners, users of open air facilities and others with an interest in access to the outdoors.

The JLAF responded to the consultation by Defra "Consultation: Future of the public forest estate" earlier this year, and to the Forestry Commission's previous consultation: "The Long-term Role of the Public Forest Estate in England" in 2009.

Well managed forestry brings environmental, economic and social benefits, but this JLAF response concentrates on those matters defined by its statutory remit, relating to access to the outdoors. Other matters though, such as the management of nature conservation and attractive landscapes can be important influences on visits to forests. For instance, appropriate tree planting schemes can enhance access. It is this multi-disciplinary green infrastructure approach to all forests that the JLAF wishes to encourage. Many of these points apply to the Public Forest Estate, but access provision and associated benefits can be accrued from woodland in public, charitable and private ownership.

1. In summary:

- There are clear economic, health, social and environmental benefits gained by providing public access to woodlands and forests on the public forest estate.
- Current use and potential access of woodlands and forests on the public forest estate should be secured through legal means, as public rights of way or access land. This should include access used by walkers, horse riders, cyclists and carriage drivers.

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The JLAF is a statutory body established by the three councils shown below, to provide advice as to the improvement of public access to land in the area of Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol City and South Gloucestershire for the purposes of open-air recreation and enjoyment of the area. Its views do not necessarily represent those of the three councils.

**Bath & North East
Somerset Council**



**South Gloucestershire
Council**

- Potential improvements to access should consider a wider network of access. Informal access should be provided, free at the point of use to walkers, cyclists and horse riders, and should always consider the needs of disabled people.
- Enhanced access facilities, such as that introduced by the 1SW off road cycling project should be expanded to more localities and for other users including equestrians.
- Informal and high quality managed access in woodlands and forests should be particularly targeted to locations easily accessible to where people live, and publicity targeted at all potential users. Forests can be used to further wider government policy objectives. A visit to a city by the Independent Panel on Forestry could be used to investigate these issues.

The potential for multi-use of all forestry land.

2. Forests provide huge potential for outdoors access. A multi-use approach to the management of all forests, rather than a wholesale zoning of forests for forestry operations, access or nature conservation is important, as is the management of both large and small forests and woodlands. Classifying all forests as either commercial or heritage forests prevents an effective multidisciplinary approach. In many cases physical infrastructure already in place to support forestry operations, such as paths and tracks is ready made for public use.

Securing and extending access.

3. The Forestry Commission dedicated pedestrian access to its freehold forestry estate under Section 16 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000. Public rights of way on the Public Forest Estate also carry statutory protection, most clearly where recorded on Definitive Maps.
4. In addition to this protected access, there is further existing access to the public forest estate that does not have such protection. Mechanisms to secure access to the freehold and non-freehold estate should be used, including further dedication under CROW and the dedication and creation of public rights of way.
5. There have been excellent new mountain biking facilities provided on the public forest estate, including at Leigh Woods near Bristol. The success of such facilities demonstrates demand near to where people live, and the potential to install further facilities on existing and new forestry land. This must be well managed, without reducing the provision of access for other users.
6. The forest estate provides huge potential as a horse riding resource. There is also potential for providing facilities to encourage access by carriage drivers to forest tracks. There is no dedicated equestrian interest on the Independent Panel. At present most horse riding, where allowed, is run under a permit scheme, where riders have to pay a substantial sum to ride. This is an anomaly as other access, such as for walkers and cyclists, is provided at no charge.
7. Horse riding and informal cycling can be extended on the forestry estate and protected through further dedications for higher rights (eg for horse riders, cyclists, or carriage drivers) under Section 16 of the CROW Act, or by using Section 25 of the Highways Act 1980 for new bridleways and restricted byways.
8. The potential of forestry land to provide managed facilities for motorised vehicle users should also be considered.
9. Provision of access in forests should always consider and maximise access for disabled people and under-represented groups.
10. When assessing and improving access to forests, the wider network of access, including public rights of way, permissive and informal access, open country and registered common land, access within stewardship schemes, the national cycle network, parks and other open spaces should be considered. Thus, the benefits of access to forests can be maximised. This should include working with Highway Authorities and Rights of Way Improvement Plans as well as local stakeholders including Local Access Forums and land managers, public, private and charitable.

11. A long term sustainable funding mechanism to maintain and enhance access to forests must be established. This should consider not only access to Forestry Commission land, but access to other woodlands and forests.

The benefits of access to woodlands and forests.

12. Access to the outdoors, to the natural environment and to quality landscapes bring benefits to health, including physical and mental health, to local economies and to the environment. This can be maximised in forests where a multi-disciplinary approach to forestry is practised.
13. There are clear economic benefits gained from access to the outdoors: "in 2010/11 alone, nearly 2.5 billion visits were made to England's countryside and open spaces, during the course of which visitors generated over £17 billion in expenditure. Over half those surveyed responded that they visit the natural environment at least once a week."
 - Wayman, E. (June 2011) *Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment: The national survey on people and the natural environment, Annual Report from the 2010-11 survey*. Natural England & Forestry Commission.
14. There are clear positive health impacts of exposure to the natural environment: "Nature and green space can be seen as a great outpatient department whose therapeutic value is yet to be fully realised."
 - Bird, W (2004) *Natural Fit and Natural Thinking, the evidence to date*. RSPB.

"Outdoor activities, particularly walking, offer a cheap and accessible route to better health for all, and address many of today's pressing public health issues. The continued use of green space for physical activity is strongly linked to the quality of the landscape – in terms of beauty, diversity, and contact with nature"

 - Bird, W (2006) *Investigating the links between the Natural Environment, Biodiversity and Mental Health*, RSPB and Natural England
15. Woodland and forestry provide important venues for families with young children and teenagers to experience and enjoy the outdoors.

"Natural spaces have a clear and important role to play in providing teenagers with the opportunities needed for their healthy physical, psychological and social development"

 - Hanna, J *et al* (May 2010) *Wild Adventure Space: its role in teenagers' lives*, Natural England
16. There is clear evidence in terms of the cost to poor health to the economy: "The estimated direct cost of physical inactivity to the NHS across the UK is £1.06 billion... There are clear and significant health inequalities in relation to physical inactivity according to income, gender, age, ethnicity and disability."
 - Burns, H; Davies, S; Jewell, T; and McBride, M, (July 2011) *Start active, stay active: a report on physical activity from the four home countries' Chief Medical Officers*, Department of Health, Physical Activity, Health Improvement and Protection.
17. Applying a multi-use approach to forests near to where people live can deliver other policy objectives: "Improving the availability of good quality open and green spaces across the social gradient... Much of what we recommend for reducing health inequalities – active travel (for example walking or cycling), public transport, energy-efficient houses, availability of green space, healthy eating, reduced carbon-based pollution – will also benefit the sustainability agenda."
 - Marmot, M *et al*, (February 2010) *The Marmot Review: Fair Society, Healthy Lives*. Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England. At: www.ucl.ac.uk/marmotreview
18. Investments in cycling and mountain biking facilities have been shown to attract significant numbers of people to exercise in the outdoors, often to those groups of people (such as young people) who typically do not access the countryside for physical activity. This provision can be extended with enhanced access management of the public forest estate. The programme of 1SW to provide regional and local hubs for off-road cycling should be expanded to include more local provision. In addition to more informal provision of access to woodlands and forests, this model could be adopted to provide high quality facilities for other users such as walkers and equestrians.
 - Katherine King (December 2010) *Lifestyle, identity and young people's experiences of mountain biking*, Forestry Commission Research Note. Forestry Commission.
 - <http://www.1sw.org.uk/experience/about-1sw/>

19. Forests can provide and should be promoted as a venue for programmes of organised events including walking for health.
- Davies, A. (January 2009) *Essential Evidence on a page - No. 6: Walking to health*, at: *Essential Evidence for Walking and Cycling* at: <http://betterbybike.org.uk/essential-evidence-for-walking-and-cycling>

Woodlands and forests near people

20. The JLAF responded to "The Long-term Role of the Public Forest Estate in England" Consultation in 2009, stating that there were opportunities to target forestry planting and acquisitions to areas near where people live, including near towns and cities such as Bristol and Bath. There is a need to recognise the importance of small areas of woodland and landscape forestry schemes that also provide access and other benefits. This would maximise the sustainable access to the forests by the public and also give more exposure to the Public Forest Estate.
21. In this area, the Forest of Avon was established in 1992 under the Community Forest programme and managed planting, woodland economy, land management, community and public access projects. The Forest of Avon's had lengthy experience of working effectively with landowners and the local authorities. The funding environment over the past 5 years has changed and the Forest of Avon scaled back the scope of its work as it became the Forest of Avon Trust.
22. The visits announced by the Independent Panel on Forestry all appear to be to established and large forests, mostly to less populous areas, so we would highlight the importance of including a visit to a city to investigate the importance and potential of woodlands, forestry and trees close to large populations. It would allow the panel to investigate the advantages that near-urban forests bring, and also some of the management considerations necessary for such land.
23. The Forestry Commission should work with other access providers and the Ordnance Survey to provide a single hub for information on access to the outdoors, to maximise use of its physical resource.

Yours sincerely,

[submitted by email from secretary@jlaf.org.uk]

Ray Newbigin, Chairman of the JLAF.

cc. David Waterstone CBE, Vice Chairman
Robert Killen, Deputy Chairman