Field Studies Council – written evidence (NER0003)

Background
The Field Studies Council (FSC) is a pioneering education charity committed to bringing environmental understanding to all. FSC provides opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to discover, explore and be inspired by the natural environment. We currently welcome 160,000 visitors every year for courses at our UK network of 20 Field Centres.

With over 70 years of experience, FSC is the UK’s leading provider of biodiversity and ecology training courses for adult learners, with career development for professionals involved in ecology, natural history and landscape related disciplines. This includes highly specialist courses in biological identification and recording.

FSC welcomes this opportunity to provide evidence to the committee. The paragraph numbers relate to the specific questions in the call for evidence.

Rural advocacy and the Commission for Rural Communities

Q1 i) The closure of the CRC and the winding up of the DEFRA Rural Communities Policy Unit risks reducing the opportunities for the concerns of rural communities to be fully considered. Whilst DEFRA have funded a number of rural advocacy organisations and networks, having a dedicated unit within government sent a strong signal that rural issues were of central concern. For example, as a rural business, FSC has struggled with the lack of broadband provision at our centres which has impacted on our teaching and scientific research activities. This essential issue would have benefited from a strong, knowledgeable and united voice from within a government department. With reductions in DEFRA staff and the winding up of the dedicated unit there is a risk that their impact is diluted or that they get pulled into other areas of work.

ii) The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC) implemented DEFRA’s 2004 Rural Strategy which stated that DEFRA would “work with schools and outdoor education providers to promote a greater understanding and appreciation of the countryside”. The Act also sets out the General Purpose of Natural England which includes “securing the provision and improvement of facilities for the study, understanding and enjoyments of the natural environment” (Chapter 1, Section 2, 2c). FSC has found that it is first hand experiences of the natural world that not only spark an interest but also builds understanding of its importance. Whilst the recent curriculum reforms aim to provide a broad education with fieldwork forming an essential part of some subjects, our research has shown that the despite the evidence of the multiple benefits of learning outside the classroom, children still miss out on outdoor learning opportunities. Therefore FSC feels that there is still a need for an advocacy role within DEFRA to highlight the need for
environmentally literate citizens, rather than the issue resting solely with the Department for Education.

**Natural England**

**Q5** i) FSC welcome the expertise and knowledge of Natural England staff especially with the addition of the recent Field Unit which provides a boost in much needed biodiversity skills. In the past Natural England promoted, supported and even part funded FSC training courses for volunteers and those in conservation management eg grassland identification and habitat surveying, and joint courses with specialist groups eg dragonflies and birds.

ii) Natural England has not designated sites recently which is a matter of concern as new sites continue to be found. Natural England need to boost the monitoring of protected sites across the UK as some are in adverse condition. A target from the EU under the Habitats Directive Natura 2000 programme was set to improve the percentage of SSSI sites that are listed as being in good condition. Resources are needed for this work to be completed and maintained.

iii) In recent years funding for volunteering initiatives has been cut. FSC would welcome the prioritisation of the support for volunteers in species identification skills. A recent successful example is the initiative to train Natural England staff and volunteers on an annual soil organism course thus supporting this group of enthusiasts who are so important in providing a wide range UK biodiversity data that is then used by government.

**Q6** FSC, with its aim to bring environmental understanding to all, welcomes the work that Natural England has done to promote access to the countryside, including for under-represented groups.

**Sustainability and biodiversity**

**Q7** In delivering specialist biodiversity courses and in our networking conferences, FSC has found that experts in their field (for example professional ecologists) express concerns about the variation of the interpretation of the clause to ‘have regard’. This indicates that it is not understood by those organisations to which it applies.

**Q8** ‘Have regard’ is vague and therefore open to wide ranging interpretation. One modification that could improve this would be for there to be a weighting or prioritisation system, especially with regard to declining populations of schedule 43 species. Since 2006, the role that enhanced biodiversity plays in a wider context has become better understood from providing natural solutions to flood management to improving health and wellbeing. Biodiversity’s growing importance across a range of public policy areas demonstrates a need
for it to have a higher status. It underpins many policy issues and is not just one facet that should be taken into account.

**Q9** The English duty to ‘have regard’ for biodiversity is weaker than the Scottish and Welsh duty to further or enhance biodiversity respectively. There needs to be a commitment to improve biodiversity to halt the continued decline of some species and habitats. The UK Biodiversity Indicators 2017 published by DEFRA demonstrate the point as they show that 11 of the 42 indicators have declined in the long term and 12 show decline in the short term.

**The changing context since 2006**

**Q10** i) The European Habitats Directive and other international agreements have set the context for biodiversity conservation and has been welcomed as being realistic, rigorous and evidence based. This has been applauded by the Natural Environment Research Council, DEFRA and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, and is taught in universities as best practice. FSC upholds this evidence based approach in its own educational programmes and works with partners to promote the understanding of the monitoring needed to assess the conditions of habitat and landscapes.

ii) We would welcome a similar model for an effective post-Brexit conservation assessment tool. However, there will be further opportunities to specifically safeguard and enhance England’s biodiversity and by extension the broader landscapes and diverse habitats (ancient woodlands, wetlands and flood plain meadow for example) that characterise the countryside. By taking a holistic approach to biodiversity and the role that it has in wide ranging policy areas from health and wellbeing and tourism to successful crop pollination and flood management, we can manage and improve our natural capital for future generations.

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