New Forest Access Forum – written evidence (NER0011)

Response to the Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 call for evidence

1. The New Forest Access Forum is the statutory local access forum for the New Forest National Park and South West Hampshire (New Forest District Council area) as required under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The appointing authorities are the New Forest National Park Authority and Hampshire County Council. The Forum is an independent body and is not bound by the policies of its appointing authorities.

2. The New Forest Access Forum feels it is only well-placed to respond to question 6:

   *Do the arrangements and provisions for enabling and managing access to the countryside remain appropriate? How effective have Natural England – and other partners – been in promoting better access?*

3. The Forum has had limited dealings with Natural England (NE) in recent years beyond the development of the England Coast Path (ECP). Representatives of NE attend national events for Local Access Forums, but rarely at a local level. We are aware that NE is highly engaged with statutory bodies locally (for example, the Forestry Commission, the New Forest National Park Authority, the Verderers of the New Forest and local authorities) in the protection of the New Forest Crown Lands Special Protection Area (SPA) and the Solent and Southampton Water SPA.

4. Since the transition from the Countryside Agency to Natural England through the NERC Act 2006, it has been our perception that it has been dominated by its conservation and biodiversity role at the expense of its countryside access and public engagement work. While this work is very important (particularly within the New Forest National Park), we feel that Natural England should play a far greater role in promoting both conservation and public access in all of their work rather than championing each in isolation. This could operate in a very similar way to the purposes of National Parks outlined in the Environment Act 1995. Perhaps this is a model which the committee could explore?

5. In the New Forest National Park, over 56% of land area is covered by designations for biodiversity (Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Ramsar sites). Our perception has been that Natural England has often acted purely in terms of conserving the ecology of these areas, viewing recreation and enjoyment often as a threat to the conservation of the Forest. Our view is that appropriate recreation is intrinsically beneficial and should be enabled through careful management rather than attempting stop it happening for fear of harm to sensitive habitats and species.
6. For example, in combination with other measures, the development of improved or new access routes across these designated areas would help to focus recreation, safeguarding wider areas from erosion and disturbance of tranquility, enabling a better recreational experience for the public and helping people to better appreciate the value and potential vulnerabilities of the natural world. Yet we see little evidence of Natural England taking this wider ‘landscape scale’ view, focussing instead on localised features of the SPA which they perceive to be threatened by recreational ‘pressure’. We would like to see more constructive engagement to help other statutory organisations find solutions, rather than simply retreating to a regulatory role.

7. It is our perception that there is little proactive action taking place in both Natural England and DEFRA’s access teams beyond the development of the England Coast Path. The NE corporate plan 2014-19 for example, has simply one page on Access, with a small work programme. Rightly, a lot of energy has gone into the England Coast Path programme and the Forum has been pleased to engage with this, as it did with implementation of the CRoW Act in the 2000s. When the England Coast Path is completed around 2020, what is going to be the next big national access project? NE and DEFRA could be engaging with stakeholders about this now so that the skills and expertise developed through the ECP can be retained and applied to greater public benefit beyond 2020.

Yours sincerely

Ruth Croker

Ruth Croker
Chairman

5 September 2017