1. The Forum would like to make the following points with respect to questions 4-6 concerning Natural England (NE). These views come from those who have been members of the Forum since its inception in about 2005 and newer members who are actively trying to improve public access in the unitary authorities of Reading, West Berkshire and Wokingham.

**Question 4: How well has Natural England fulfilled the mandate that it currently has? How well do its wide-ranging functions fit together, and does it have the appropriate powers and resources to perform these functions?**

2. The Forum feels that NE is not supporting public access and Local Access Forums adequately. It is unclear to us whether this is because of its mandate, lack of powers or lack of resources due to reductions in Government spending throughout the last decade. Public access generally seems to be the cinderella within NE and does not seem to be fitting well within its mandate which focusses on protection of the environment. This is unsatisfactory when public access is accepted as contributing to human health & well-being, the rural economy and tourism and when resources to local authorities, who manage much public access, are being severely cut back.

3. NE appears to suffer from a fundamental dichotomy. Section 2 of NERC states that NE’s general purpose is “to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced and managed”. “Promoting access to the countryside and open spaces and encouraging open-air recreation” comes 4th in a list of 5 strands to its purpose in Section 2(2) of the Act. This, perhaps inadvertent ranking, seems to us to be how NE sees its priorities.
4. Examples of lack of support known to us are:
   i. Notification of this consultation only via Huddle, a medium used poorly by Local Access Forums. An inquiry to NE revealed that Forum secretaries have not been contacted directly. A lack of response from local access forums may be because they are unaware of this consultation.
   ii. Lack of the presence of a NE officer, even occasionally, at forum meetings. How is the flow of information between forums and NE to take place?
   iii. Withdrawal of support for the national and regional forum structure. This means that many forums are working in isolation and at a time when, amongst other things, forums should be debating the role of public access in future farm subsidies post Brexit in order to improve public access in consultation with land managers.
   iv. No calls so far for contributions to the annual report. The report not only serves to inform central government of the work being done by forums but also helps to keep them in touch with each other.
   v. Very late notification of the financial settlements to national trails and a severe reduction in the settlement to such an extent that it has threatened their viability.
   vi. Removal of the funding for the part time secretary for the Rights of Way Review Committee, threatening its existence and loss of access to Ministers.

5. Yes, changes within NE are required or, perhaps preferably, public access needs to be transferred to a public access department within Defra, to the Department of Transport or even a new body. Since the setting up of NE in 2006, public access seems to have become a low priority. Assuming that central government does recognize that public access has an important role in human health & well-being, the rural economy and tourism, either the priorities within NE need re-balancing or public access needs to be moved to an organization which can give it higher priority.

6. At a time when future agricultural subsidies will be being discussed, NE should be taking the initiative by consulting with Local Access Forums to gather ideas about how public benefit can be delivered with public money after Brexit by providing improved public access compatible with land use. There appears to be a vacuum.
7. Following the CROW Act 2000 when the 2026 deadline for recording paths was set, NE launched on an ambitious historic research project to meet the requirements of the CROW Act. However, the project proved expensive and unwieldy in NE’s hands and was abandoned leaving a few volunteer organizations to pick up the pieces. These organizations are showing that there is much unrecorded access in some parts of the country which could contribute to a joined-up, much needed, off-road public rights of way network but NE is offering no support for this work.

Question 6. Do the arrangements and provisions for enabling and managing access to the countryside remain appropriate?

8. No. We are not sure what NE’s procedures are for managing access to the countryside but the wealth of expertise within local access forums is not being harnessed.

How effective have Natural England – and other partners – been in promoting better access?

9. There have been good initiatives but they vary in their effectiveness. It is debateable whether the vast resource going into development of the coastal national trail has been wise when support for public access generally has been withdrawn / reduced. But perhaps NE is just implementing central government policy? There needs to be serious debate about the future of national trails which NE could be leading rather than leaving it to the stakeholders, many of who are volunteers.

10. The Paths for Communities fund focussed on improving public access where it is needed. This was much welcomed but the project was short lived and expensive per metre of new path. This project needs to be permanent and NE needs to work more closely with Local Access Forums and landowners to achieve cost-effective results. Opportunities via Brexit need to be seized. Have NE got any plans?

11. The setting up of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANGS) is providing access close to where people need access. However, some feel that, with better consultation with local access forums and user groups, better use of SANGs could have been made by providing safe, off-road access for a wider range of user groups. This is another example where NE does not appear to have given public access sufficient attention.
12. In conclusion, we feel strongly that there is an urgent need to set up a department or body whose prime purpose is to improve and promote public access for a full range of user groups in order to meet the proven health and economic benefits of outdoor exercise. This new organization needs to harness the considerable expertise within local access forums so that the current impediments to the improvement of public access can be addressed in an effective manner.

[end]

8 September 2017