

LETTER TO ALUN MICHAEL M.P. FROM WESTCOUNTRY LAFs.

WESTCOUNTRY LOCAL ACCESS FORUMS

On 24 June 2004 Devon County Council hosted a workshop for representatives from the Local Access Forums (LAFs) for Cornwall, Dartmoor, Devon, Dorset, Exmoor, Somerset and Torbay. This group of Westcountry LAFs represents an area where tourism makes a major contribution to the local economy.

The lead speaker Malcolm Bell, Chief Executive of South West Tourism, emphasised the economic benefits of the landscape of the Westcountry, and the consequent importance of the public access implicit in the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000. Valuable inputs from DEFRA and the Countryside Agency were followed by group discussions where the experiences of the various LAFs were shared.

All the representatives were agreed on the value which their expert independence could bring and were keen to develop the role of the LAF as an expert body which could advise and support improvements in access issues.

While each LAF has specific successes and problems they were unanimous in wishing to draw your attention to the main issues of :

1. **CONFUSION.**
2. **COMMUNICATION.**
3. **CONTINUITY.**

These are detailed below.

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1. CONFUSION.

There is public confusion and ignorance about the role of LAFs. LAF members themselves are sometimes also confused by conflicting messages from government agencies and, in some cases, from their appointing authorities. The role of the non-statutory National Countryside Access Forum in relation to the statutory LAFs causes some concern and it may be helpful if LAFs were represented on the National Forum in order to avoid misunderstandings.

Westcountry LAFs would welcome further guidance from the Minister in order to clarify to members and the appointing authorities how the role of LAFs

should develop and how the appointing authorities should assist in achieving these objectives.

2. COMMUNICATION.

The opportunities for valuable inter-LAF communication, for example in relation to long-distance and inter-county routes, need to be developed, and Westcountry LAFs are well placed to be involved in any pilot initiatives in this direction. Communication with the public is also inhibited by the lack of extensive and co-ordinated national publicity promoting a clear role and status for LAFs.

Westcountry LAFs would welcome further guidance from the Minister on the lines of responsibility and communication from the LAFs to the minister, and clarifying the positions of the appointing authorities and the National Countryside Access Forum within this structure.

3. CONTINUITY.

LAFs are already making a valuable voluntary contribution to the implementation of the CRoW Act 2000. However, they still need to establish their acceptance and credibility as indisputably independent and effective advisers to their appointing authorities on long-term access maintenance and improvement through, for example, local transport plans.

Westcountry LAFs would welcome further guidance from the Minister on both the amount and time scale of the funding they can reasonably expect their appointing authorities should allocate to the LAFs to ensure the quality and continuity of their contribution to improved public access.

Signed on behalf of the Westcountry Local Access Forums including Cornwall, Dartmoor, Devon, Dorset, Exmoor, Somerset and Torbay.

Yours sincerely,

R. O. Harvey, Chairman, Devon Local Access Forum.

(Attached : contact addresses for Chairmen of Westcountry LAFs)