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To: All local access forum members and secretaries in England

From the Minister for Rural Affairs and Local Environmental Quality
The Rt Hon Alun Michael MP

New Access Forum Member,

Twelve months have now passed since the date set for local access authorities to have in place a local access forum for their area, and there are now 79 forums covering almost all local authority areas across England.

I am very pleased to see the way that Forums have considered and advised on a wide range of access and open-air recreational issues over the past year, drawing on their members' local knowledge, expertise and experience. This comes through clearly from a number of annual reports that I have seen. Also evident is the level of commitment and dedication demonstrated by forum members and secretaries, for which I would personally like to express my appreciation to you all.

My purpose in writing to you now is to encourage lateral thinking and a positive use of the opportunity provided by the existence of your forum. It is inevitable that the early focus would be on getting the forum up and running, creating a good understanding between members, and dealing with the consequences of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act more generally. But it doesn't need to stop there, and there can be benefits for everyone - for various groups that want access, for farmers and land managers, for the local community and the local economy - if we take a wider view.

Local access forums are uniquely placed to advise on - and indeed champion - access and public rights of way at the local level. Forums also have a role to play in advising on open-air recreational issues generally, on land and water, within their areas. As forum members are freely giving of their own time, and are making available their personal knowledge and expertise for the benefit of their own local communities, it is

vital for them to receive the support and information which they require to advise their access authorities, the Countryside Agency and others - including Government - as effectively as possible. I know that appointing authorities generally are playing a key role in supporting their own forums.

Liaison between forums is vital and, one year on, it is clear that there is scope to develop arrangements to facilitate better two-way communication at all levels. It is also now timely to consider whether forums might benefit from revised guidance or information on how best to fulfil their statutory functions. For example, this might include identification and dissemination of good practice, of which there are undoubtedly many examples already in existence.

I am also aware from the many letters that I have received from Members of Parliament on behalf of canoeists, that access to water is an issue, and we need to give further consideration to the role of forums in advising on wider forms of access, including access to water. Some of you may already have dealt with this issue in your area and I would welcome specific views and experience on this issue

The Local Government Association is taking the lead in identifying local authority contact officers for each region. Their role will be to facilitate effective liaison between all the forums within their region. The Countryside Agency is providing support and making funds available through its regional offices to help with information exchange or the holding of workshops and other events to enable forum representatives to come together to discuss issues of mutual interest.

Over the coming months Defra will be working with the Countryside Agency who will be talking to forum representatives to find out what support, information or guidance forum members would find most helpful. I also look forward to hearing what ideas members have about clarifying, improving and developing the role of local access forums.

In the meantime, if you have any particular thoughts on these matters, please feel free to get in contact with my officials in the Department's Countryside (Recreation and Landscape) Division (contact: Geoff Audcent on 0117 372 8339, 1/02 Temple Quay House, Bristol, BS1 6EB, e-mail: geoff.audcent@defra.gsi.gov.uk)

Yours sincerely
John Michael