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Our ref: CROW 44

To: All Local Access Forums in England

28 May 2009

From Huw Irranca-Davies MP

Minister for the Natural and Marine Environment, Wildlife and Rural Affairs

Dear Local Access Forum member,

In writing this letter I want to not only introduce myself, as the Minister for the Natural and Marine Environment, Wildlife and Rural Affairs, but also to highlight the importance I attach to the dedicated work of Local Access Forums around the country.

My Ministerial responsibilities include not only the new provisions for coastal access but also urban greenspace, common land and National Parks, and therefore Local Access Forums and most of their areas of interest fall under my remit. I have already had contact with some Forums on specific issues, but I thought it would be useful to give you all some idea of how I see the role of Forums developing in the future.

I am sending this letter not only to the Secretaries of the Forums, but also to the Chief Executives of all Local Authorities in England, because I think it is important to spread the word about the excellent work that Forums are already doing, and about their potential to advise, assist and influence in future Government access programmes.

Since their establishment Forums have come a long way, and they are constantly evolving and developing as they face new challenges. Whilst we have issued revised Guidance and new Regulations for Local Access Forums in 2007, and will ensure that Forums are statutory consultees on relevant matters, there is still considerable flexibility and scope for individual Forums to work in ways which are most suited to their specific local needs. Some Forums have taken on these challenges and are setting the access agenda in their areas, and I hope that some of this best practice can be shared more widely.

I am aware that the links between individual Forums and central government, and its agencies, have not always been as clear as you would have liked, and I understand that Forums have worked together to achieve the aim of speaking with one voice by creating the England Access Forum, which will go some way to improving these links.

There is also an obligation on central government, having sought the views of Forums, to give proper weight to those views, and there is a need for all bodies receiving advice from Forums to be fully aware of the status and role of Forums and the value of their advice. I am looking at ways of raising awareness of Forums to address these concerns.

Access is now taking on a central role in achieving many of the Government's targets on health, reducing anti-social behaviour, and promoting more sustainable forms of transport. It also has a significant importance in helping people engage with the natural environment and promoting a sense of well being.

I hope that rights of way improvement plans can now be implemented over the next few years with the recognition by stakeholders of the their social value and look forward to Forums joining me in helping to deliver their aims. There is much work to do and with the introduction of the coastal access provisions in the Marine and Coastal Access Bill there will be a particular role for those Forums whose areas include coastline in providing expert advice to Natural England on the delivery of coastal access in their region.

In conclusion I would just like to acknowledge the hard work that so many people have contributed over the last few years as members of Forums. I recognise that you all do this as volunteers, and your commitment and dedication is much appreciated. You have a key role as representatives of your local communities, ensuring that access is not overlooked. I will be asking Natural England, both nationally and regionally, to look closely at this and to give Forums the support they need.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several fluid, overlapping strokes that form a stylized representation of the name 'Huw Irranca-Davies'.

HUW IRRANCA-DAVIES