

Written evidence submitted by the Essex Local Access Forum (AB54)

1. The Essex Local Access Forum (ELAF) is an independent statutory advisory body set up under Section 94 of the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000. LAF's statutory function is to "advise as to the improvement of public access to land in that area for the purposes of open-air recreation and the enjoyment of the area, and as to such other matters as may be prescribed".

2. ELAF strongly support the underpinning concept of the new agricultural policy - the payment of public money for the provision of public goods. As a Local Access Forum, ELAF welcome the financial assistance powers in Clause 1 - specifically Clause 1 (b) (lines 9+10):

(b) supporting public access to and enjoyment of the countryside, farmland or woodland and better understanding of the environment.

ELAF ask that opportunities for public access are not side-lined but are given equal prominence in the "public good" options that will be available to farmers & land managers.

ELAF AMMENDMENT 1:

Whilst one would hope that public access to the countryside, farmland or woodland, would lead to a better understanding of the environment - this cannot be assumed. **ELAF therefore requests that clause (1) (b) lines 9+10 is split to read:**

(1)(b-1) supporting public access to and enjoyment of the countryside, farmland or woodland

(1)(b-2) supporting better understanding of the environment.

3. Public access and the public rights of way (PROW) network is of great benefit to the physical and mental well-being of people. PROWs offer sustainable transport routes and healthy outdoor exercise for a wide variety of recreational and utility purposes, including walking, running, cycling and horse riding. PROWs provide excellent opportunities for leisure that is free at the point of use and their use by the public supports rural economies, tourism and rural businesses in many areas.

4. Pedestrian access to the countryside is generally theoretically extensive through the use of the public footpath network, common land, CROW access land & long distance trails such as the England coastal path, due to be completed this year (2020).

However, on-the-ground practical, user-friendly, physical public access to the countryside is less:

- as vehicular roads & rural lanes that serve as connections between PROWs:
 - (i) have become increasingly busy with vehicular traffic and so less safe to use by non-motorised users - pedestrians, cyclists, joggers, horseriders and mobility impaired users;
 - (ii) crossing dual carriageways & other de-restricted busy main roads has become hazardous and may be impossible due to the presence of continuous crash barriers.
- as at grade railway crossings are closed (Network Rail's stated aim).

- due to budgetary pressures on highway authorities which has led to a reduction in maintenance such that public rights of way become overgrown and unusable.
- due to a lack of signage / waymarking to help people navigate through the countryside with confidence. Waymarking is not a statutory duty for highway authorities.

Public access to and through the countryside can be enhanced and not just supported by providing farmers and land managers with public money to overcome these hindrances to public access by, for example:

- the provision of permanent new public off-road links accessible to all non-motorised users (NMUs).
- the provision of permanent new public off-road NMU routes, possibly using farm bridges / underpasses, to overcome severance by main roads and railways.
- undertaking waymarking and signage. This should also decrease the incidence of people straying off-line and into environmental field margins.
- maintaining headland paths as part of their hedgerow and general land management regimes. This would fit in with landowners' existing statutory duty to re-instate crossfield PROWs and to keep them clear.

5. Although access for fit and reasonably fit walkers is generally extensive, access is much more limited for other people such as dog walkers, runners, cyclists, equestrians & mobility impaired people. Again, public access should not just be supported but should be enhanced to enable and encourage access to the countryside by a wider range of people. Financial assistance should be available to farmers & land managers to increase accessibility by:

- removing stiles and replacing them with gates, or gaps where there is no livestock and no easy to access for fly tipping from nearby roads, in keeping with the Equality Act and the British Standard for Gaps, Gates and Stiles.
- providing slopes rather than steps where there is space.
- enhancing & upgrading paths to enable use by cyclists & equine users as well as pedestrians.
- providing firmer surfacing & wider paths where possible & appropriate in order to provide "all weather" paths for safe shared multi-user routes, including use by mobility impaired people and mobility scooters.
- providing shorter circular accessible routes within walking distance of housing clusters and public transport.

6. Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW), Rights of Way Improvement Plans (RoWIPs) are statutory documents which local highway authorities must develop and periodically update in consultation with local stakeholders - highways authorities, health authorities, landowners non-motorised users, etc. Currently, RoWIPs remain unfunded and there is no statutory duty to deliver the improvements. However, going forward, ROWIPS could be used to identify & prioritise improvements in public access to and through the countryside in their areas.

ELAF AMMENDMENT 2:

Rather than simply supporting public access, financial assistance should incentivise farmers and land managers to **improve and enhance** public access to and through the countryside **for all types of users**. ELAF therefore requests that clause (1) (b) line 9+10 is amended to read:

(1)(b) enhancing public enjoyment of and public access through and to the countryside, farmland or woodland for all types of non-motorised users....

Essex Local Access Forum
Chairman - Katherine Evans
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