

**Sponsorship, landscape & Recreation Division**

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Mr Balfour  
Kent Countryside Access Forum  
c/o Kent County Council  
Environment and Waste  
Invicta House  
County Hall  
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ME14 1XX

Our ref:

Date: 18 May 2007

Dear Mr Balfour

**IMPLEMENTATION OF RIGHTS OF WAY IMPROVEMENT PLANS**

Thank you for your letter of 26 April to Barry Gardiner, commenting on the points he made in his earlier letter to local access forums. I have been asked to reply.

I note your suggestion that local authorities should have a legal duty to publish bi-annual progress reports concerning implementation of their rights of way improvement plans (ROWIPs). However, imposing such a duty would have disadvantages as well as benefits: It could lead to unfair criticism of authorities where targets have not been met for reasons beyond the authority's control, and could have deterred authorities from being ambitious in setting their aims and objectives. A duty to produce progress reports would also impose additional costs on authorities.

I am not suggesting that monitoring and reviewing progress is not important, simply that it is best dealt with at the local level, so that local authorities (advised by their local access forum) decide what suits their own area. This is consistent with the Government's general approach towards local government (as set out in the Local Government White Paper published in October 2006), which seeks to provide freedom and space for councils to respond with flexibility to local needs and demands.

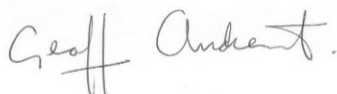
The Minister's letter recognised that funding is important, and explained why additional ring-fenced funding was not being made available. I appreciate that there are always competing demands on local authority budgets, and accessing external funding sources can pose a challenge. That is why Natural England will be supporting local authorities, through regional workshops and training events, with a national programme of guidance based on current practice and shared experience. The initial focus will be on capturing experience in fundraising, and then to share this through training events, case studies and signposting guides. Further information, and invitations, will be sent to local authorities - and local access forums - in the coming months.

Whilst I do not share your negative assessment of the potential funding opportunities which exist, I agree that not all external funding sources will be suitable in all areas or on all occasions. In reality, such funding is likely to be targeted to where overlaps exist between ROWIP objectives and the purposes for which funding is available.



You end by asking “why it was thought practical to statutorily obligate local authorities to carry out ROWIPs without giving them the funding to carry out the results ?” The value of ROWIPs comes from the fact that they encourage new ways of thinking about, and improving, the rights of way network. A well-written ROWIP should help a local authority to more effectively unlock the various opportunities and funding sources which exist, and to better integrate management of, and improvements to, the network with overlapping environmental, social and economic objectives.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Geoff Audcent". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Geoff Audcent  
Rights of Way Policy and Legislation Team