

05 February 2007

Barry Gardiner MP
Minister for Biodiversity, Landscape & Rural Affairs
DEFRA
Nobel House, 17 Smith Square
London
SW1P 3JR

Dear Minister

Implementing Rights of Way Improvement Plans

I am writing to you as Chair of Cumbria Local Access Forum and on behalf of the Chairs of the Lake District National Park and Yorkshire Dales National Park Access Forums.

We are concerned about the information we are being given about the implementation of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) here in Cumbria but we suspect that our concerns will be widely reflected nationally.

Government's decision to require the preparation of ROWIPs was an inspired one and has led to a much-needed and overdue assessment of what exists and how relevant it is to the needs of the community in the 21st Century. It ties in with other national agendas relating to health, recreation, enhancing the rural economy, and encouraging access to the countryside by those ethnic and urban groups so sadly under using our rural treasures.

Greater use of paths and byways is crucial to the delivery of Government policy to improve health and tackle juvenile obesity and of course encouraging folks to walk rather than use cars is immediately relevant to the 'green' agenda.

In Cumbria where an enlightened Council in full co-operation with the Parks Authorities has put in a huge effort with the support and involvement of the three LAFs and other voluntary bodies, we are well on the way to a final document with great potential and vision. As a welcome consequence there has been a real upsurge in public interest combined with greatly raised expectations and a sense of excitement.

It is heartening to see Natural England in this region seeking support for their efforts to raise the profile of ROWIPs with Chief Executives and elected members in relevant authorities and to encourage them to complete high quality ROWIPs by the due date at end November 2007.

The fly in the ointment is that while authorities are required to complete ROWIPs there is no requirement to implement them and even more significantly, at this stage, no money for that purpose.

We are aware that national government has signalled that from 2010-11 onwards, Local Transport Plans (LTPs) and Rights of Way Improvement Plans (ROWIPs) should become a singular document for local authorities. Both documents are clearly linked in order to facilitate this national picture. That is a long time away and if there is no additional funding of any kind next year, not only will all the impetus be lost but raised and legitimate expectations will be lost. There are annual settlements made for LTPs but these are tight in the extreme in Cumbria and there is no realistic prospect of any money being set aside for implementing ROWIPs.

We are very concerned that there is no indication from government as to how planned and necessary works will be funded. Current messages from Natural England suggest that no separate or increased ring-fenced funding will be provided through the LTP settlement for Public Right of Way (PROW) projects identified in the ROWIP by Cumbria County Council and the two National Parks and that they will have to compete against all the other transport works.

We are well aware of the pros and cons of hypothecated or ring fenced funding but would urge that at least for an initial period either a separate 'priming' grant be made or a specific allocation within the LTP settlement.

We have here nationally as a result of government foresight the chance to make significant improvements towards meeting wider goals and a lot of people inspired and motivated to get on with it, many of them from the Third Sector. Without some financial provision all this is likely to disappear down the potholes which will inevitably be the LTP priority of hard pressed council members. I am informed that Natural England is seeking a sum of the order of some £30,000 for the whole of North West England from Cheshire to us up here. It needs a much more significant sum to capitalise on all the good will and enthusiasm which the work on ROWIPs has engendered, and to bring about significant improvement for the community.

Best Wishes.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Duncan Graham". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chairman of Cumbria LAF on behalf of the Chairmen of all three forums.