

West Sussex Local Access Forum

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George Eustice
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Dear Secretary of State

Re: Agriculture Act 2020 & ELMS

I am writing to the above consultation on behalf of the West Sussex Local Access Forum (WSLAF).

West Sussex Local Access Forum (WSLAF) is an independent advisory body, established under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, to give access advice to local authorities, statutory organisations and non-government organisations. In giving that advice, the Forum's main objective is to ensure the existing network of public rights of way (prows), as well as the wider access network, is protected and where possible enhanced. The Forum has a balanced membership of knowledgeable and experienced users (walkers, cyclists, horse riders and carriage drivers), landowners and other interests (including conservation, disabled access, landscape). For further information about the Forum please visit the WSLAF website, www.wslaf.org.

The Forum has been monitoring the progress of the proposed changes to the post CAP farm subsidy payments system for some years. In May 2018 we responded to the consultation on 'Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit'. In our response we advised that in our area the Public Rights of Way (PRoW) are mainly footpaths with limited bridleway provision. The system is fragmented, many paths ending on busy roads with no onward connectivity or having to be linked by the use of minor roads which have become unsafe for Non-Motorised Users (NMUs) because of increasing traffic levels, exacerbated by large amounts of new development throughout the county.

Our proposal was to improve public access to the countryside by linking farm subsidy payments to enhanced or new access to ensure public benefit is secured in return for public money. Those who own or manage the land should be financially rewarded for providing this additional access.

We were pleased to note that the Agriculture Act 2020 states that financial support may be given to 'supporting public access to and enjoyment of the countryside', and that the subsequent Government publication 'The Path to Sustainable Farming' introduces

Environment Land Management Schemes (ELMS) which are founded on the principle of 'public goods for public money'.

The Forum also recognises the importance of the Government's 25-year Environmental plan to protect the natural environment as part of their commitment to reversing biodiversity loss and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to Net Zero by 2050.

The experience of the pandemic, resulting in vastly increased use of the Public Rights of Way network, has clearly shown how important access to the countryside and the natural environment is for the public's health and wellbeing. We consider that the provision of improved safe access for all Non-Motorised Users (walkers, cyclists, equestrians) is widely supported.

We are aware that tests and trials of ELMs are currently underway but it is understood that there are a relatively small number of trials focused on public access and we are concerned that this represents a lessening of the importance for access. We urge the Government to ensure that the provision of improved access forms part of the new farm subsidy system which will provide a benefit of improved health and wellbeing for public money.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jane Noble', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jane Noble, Forum Officer
West Sussex Local Access Forum

cc - WSLAF Forum members