

MEETING : CHESHIRE LOCAL ACCESS FORUM
DATE : 17 SEPTEMBER 2010

REPORT OF : COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS DEVELOPMENT OFFICERS
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PROPOSED CHANGES TO NATURAL ENGLAND

1. Introduction

- 1.0 The new government, in light of the budget deficit, have initiated proposed changes to government departments and organisations including Natural England. Here follows notes from a meeting between Local Access Forum chairs and representatives from Natural England outlining possible future scenarios and consequences for Forums.

2. Proposed changes

- 2.0 All government departments have been asked to cut budgets by 30% or so over the next few years (DEFRA included in that and has asked all agencies to consider as well).
- 2.1 More recently, being asked to undergo a 40% cut exercise as well. In Natural England, we have made £7.4m of savings this year.
- 2.2 Internal Natural England Performance Efficiency Programme (PEP) review work is looking at implications of this within Natural England (how do we do this and what would it look like).
- 2.3 Cuts will be painful as Natural England has already gone through an efficiency programme since its birth over last few years (V.E.R, rationalisation of office estates etc).
- 2.4 Changes not just driven by 'financial' motives but also in tune with the 'big society/localism' agenda that the coalition government are looking to pursue.
- 2.5 Uncertainty at this stage over future levels of funding and resources for LAFs over the next few years from Natural England.
- 2.6 Regional structures not 'in favour' in current coalition government – so future landscape is likely to be very different in the future.
- 2.7 New structures could present problems but also some big opportunities in that it allows us to focus on very specific issues that currently straddle borders.
- 2.8 Natural England job cuts – expected to make 400 cuts in 2011/12 with more possible in the future (this in addition to FTA, short term staff etc).

- 2.9 Walking for Health/Department of Health programme (and its staff) – likely to be progressed in the future by transferring over to a new ‘body’/organisation.
- 2.10 Current timeline is moving very fast and more likely that decisions will need to be taken asap thus reducing the potential for widespread consultation.
- 2.11 Current thinking around future of Natural England work / structures:
- 2.12 Overall remit of the organisation is likely to remain the same.
- 2.13 Looking at different organisational structures (landscape, super-regions, national teams leading etc).
- 2.14 Coastal access - to continue but delivery model and timescales likely to be different than originally perceived.
- 2.15 Natural England likely to focus on evaluation, setting standards, evidence, research, monitoring and delivery with ‘policy development’ being owned or moved back to government departments (to become less ‘grey’ than is currently the case). Natural England to provide support, technical advice to policy makers. Also a shift of some current delivery to other non-government organisations / 3rd sector bodies.
- 2.16 England Access Forum –in this context then it may be that the future of the Forum lies with DEFRA as opposed to Natural England as DEFRA will be the body who will be setting policy in the future .
- 2.17 Natural Environment White Paper – being launched and a key document for Local Access Forums/England Access Forum to consider.

3. TIMESCALES

- 3.0 Spending Review – Autumn 2010 that will set out spending for next few year and this will help us to determine what we can and cannot do.
- 3.1 Natural England (between now and April 2011) will be reorganising and redefining what we do to fit in with budget cuts (could involve fairly large internal changes but not sure how this will look like for external partners).
- 3.2 April 2011 – Natural England will be smaller, more focussed organisation with a different organisational structure.
- 3.3 Results of Performance Efficiency Programme review will be agreed internally and then to DEFRA before finally setting out a clear way forward for our work.
- 3.4 Natural England hope to have some more definitive ‘answers’ by end of year 2010 / early New Year 2011, if not sooner.

RECOMMENDED:

That the report be noted and the Forum consider:

- internal dialogue and discussions with a range of bodies – including Natural England, authorities and others as everyone starts to try and re-position themselves for the next few years; and,
- it may be useful for the Forum to review and consider its role, function and mission (in the context of the Local Access Forum guidance and Regulations) with respect not only to their authorities, but also to the relationship and role of North West Local Access Forum and England Access Forum, Natural England and other the other s94 bodies.