



Dear Reverend James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool

As one of the first groups to meet with you in your capacity as chair of the Independent Panel on Forestry, the Forest Access User Group would like to thank you and the panel members for the work the panel have undertaken to date. It is clear from the progress report the depth to which you have engaged with what is a wide ranging subject.

The group would like to put on record how pleased we are that the panel have both understood and so strongly supported the Public Forest Estate as the outstanding provider of high-quality recreational and sporting access. This “gold standard” quality of access, both protected in law and by permission, must be maintained for the wider public benefit and must also be recognised at the core of any new forestry policy, providing a vital link with local communities.

However, after analysing the report we are disappointed that the panel has, at this stage, not highlighted the increasing economic benefits access and recreation bring as part of well-planned mixed woodland. We feel that this will play an increasingly important economic role for woods and forests which are outside of the Public Forest Estate and are concerned that the current focus is based on the economics of timber and habitats alone. The public value of our woodlands for a range of specific activities such as orienteering, and those wider benefits outlined in the recent National Ecosystem Assessment, are well documented and the group will be submitting a more detailed paper to the panel outlining examples of where our activities are currently enjoyed.

Alongside the progress report we note that the panel will shortly be discussing an independent research paper on access and recreation alongside holding hearing sessions. The Forest Access User Group would very much like to feed directly into the panel’s discussions at this critical time. As yet, we do not believe any of our organisations have been asked to feed into this research in such a way that is meaningful, which is surprising given the level and range of recreational activities undertaken by our members.

You may recall that during our first meeting we were assured that the group would have a chance to discuss our experience of access to our forests and woodlands with the panel. We feel that such a meeting is now timely given the planned independent research and is vital if the panel is to make balanced recommendations in its final report.

We envisage that such a meeting would cover the following topics which we believe are not addressed in the progress report:

1. The protection of current permissive access levels both on and off the Public Forest Estate;
2. The role of dedication of other user rights, such as equestrian and cycling, under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act;
3. The role of increasing public access to woods outside of the public forest estate and the role reduced occupier's liability could play in helping with this under section 13 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act;
4. To clarify and expand on the Progress Report's outline of costs relating to current and enhanced access levels;
5. The lessons learnt from open access provision to woodland in Scotland;
6. The role of conditional recreational access in achieving maximum public benefits for public money when awarding grant funding.

We look forward to an early opportunity to meet the Panel to discuss these and other topics.

The Forest Access User Group is:

The British Horse Society
British Mountaineering Council
British Siberian Husky Racing Association
British Orienteering
CTC - Cyclists' Touring Club
The Kennel Club
IMBA - International Mountain Biking Association
Open Spaces Society
Ramblers
The Sport and Recreation Alliance