

Dear Rebecca

I am writing both as your constituent and on behalf of Taunton Deane Bridleways Association to express our deep disappointment at the failure of the Government to include public access in the Sustainable Farming Scheme. Further to very recent announcements regarding soaring numbers of road deaths in rural areas, the intimidation and danger experienced by equestrians, cyclists and walkers and particularly women, this announcement is particularly poorly timed.

As my MP, please would you urgently press the Government for public access creation and improvement to be either embedded in every Environmental Land Management Scheme or for the development of a stand-alone access scheme that can be attached to all the ELM schemes.

Our organisation has been pleased to note the inclusion of public access in the recently launched Woodland and Farming in Protected Landscape schemes but the lack of access provision in Sustainable Farming or even mention of how access will be included later, is a matter of grave concern. Our government expects taxpayers to invest heavily in supporting farmers in producing good quality food, improving the environment and in action to support nature recovery. We recognise that these are important in tackling climate change but improving public health through the provision of access as a public good is also vital.

Launching schemes without an offer to incentivise public access engagement is to risk losing the support of millions of countryside access users which include walkers, equestrians, cyclists, canoeists and the elderly and disabled, either on ATVs or included in the preceding groups.

We feel that there should at the very least have been an indication of how public access as a public good is to be embedded in ELM at a later date included in yesterday's announcement. No doubt it is clear to you that failing to mention public access at all was a very serious omission. Please ask our government to take steps to remedy this immediately and in all future announcements.

By (so far) failing to embed public access in ELM the Government is failing to grasp an exciting opportunity to encourage public engagement with food, farming, nature and landscape with all the benefits that could bring to users and to landowners and farmers. Investment in access through ELM could transform the rights of way and minor highway network infrastructure provision, which is currently so poorly connected, often inaccessible and unsafe, into an extremely valuable public asset enabling active travel, recreation, sport and countryside access, whilst safeguarding and improving habitat. Providing the means for people everywhere to SAFELY switch to active travel is key to reducing our carbon emissions as well as to improving public health. These twin concerns should be absolutely paramount in this present era of both climate emergency and pandemic. Please press our government to recognise and to grasp this opportunity.

We are furthermore aware that, following The Trails Trust ELM test 159 on public access and biodiversity in ELM, which was conducted on behalf of Defra Tests and Trials, it became clear that landowners and farmers are very willing to engage with a permanent multi-use access and biodiversity creation and improvement scheme subject to reasonable

rewards, route location and public education. They recognised that strategically placed access could have big benefits for them as well as for local communities in enabling diversification and underpinning the rural economy. Test 159 report and appendix can be found here <http://www.thetrailstrust.org.uk/pages/downloads.php>.

Farmers play an important role in protecting the environment, but the failure to also offer them the opportunity to receive payment for improving public access in the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) shows a complete lack of ambition and urgency from the Government to back up their promises to connect more people to nature.

The Sustainable Farming Incentive component of ELM should have seen provisions for farmers to receive payments for improvements to existing rights of way. These could have included improvements to surfaces, better signage and replacing stiles with accessible gates - the latter being important as Natural England estimates that 20% of people can't access existing paths because of disabilities.

While this would be entirely optional for farmers it would enable them to receive extra financial support while also making the countryside more accessible to more people. **It's vital that Ministers look again at these plans and stick to the promises they made earlier in the year**

Please forward this letter to these Ministers – The RT Hon George Eustace MP, The Rt Hon The Lord Goldsmith, The Rt Hon The Lord Benyon, The Hon Victoria Prentis, and Jo Churchill MP. Please ask them to respond to the contents of this letter and to confirm to the millions of the public taxpayers who care deeply about access to the countryside and who are frustrated by the Government's lack of understanding in this matter, that they will work with the public to embed access into ELM as a public good.

As Taunton Deane has many fewer bridleways and multi-access routes than other areas of Somerset, we are particularly hopeful that a great improvement can be achieved with ELM legislation.

I look forward to your and their responses

Yours sincerely

*Ann Finn*

Chairman, Taunton Deane Bridleways Association