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9 December 2010

Richard Benyon MP
Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London SW1P 3JR

Your ref: MC 188326

Dear Minister,

Review of National Parks/Broads Governance Arrangements

The One Voice group is an advocate for residents living in the New Forest National Park and our message is simply “informing and empowering New Forest Residents and Visitors”.

As you know, I take a keen interest in the progress of the above review of National Parks, but I must always hold a neutral, honest and factual view when passing on relevant information to our members. This is not bound by Charity Commission regulations or any code of conduct of a public body; it is bound by a personal sense of integrity.

However, our ethos has become more difficult to maintain since the launch of the review because of conflicting messages in the national press and TV; predominantly driven by Campaign for National Parks (CNP) and The Peak District National Park Authority.

Neither has it been helped by the advice given to NFNPA by the English National Park Authorities Association (ENPAA) that “Members should be cautious about the desirability of direct elections, as they were expensive and onerous to administer”. (*A point of interest is that our residents survey currently shows 84% of participants agree that NPA members should be directly elected*).

These organisations, in my view, are acting without integrity in what appears to be a strategically planned campaign to ensure the self-preservation of National Park Authorities rather than opening up opportunities for NP residents to become involved in the review. Some of their claims that spending cuts would be disastrous for NPs are totally unfounded speculation, but put across to the general public as the ‘thin end of the wedge’ or the beginning of the demise of NPs – in effect, scaring the public into accepting no change to National Parks would be the safest option and consequently injecting a significant degree of negativity towards the governance review.

I am not a strategist, neither am I stupid enough to believe these claims, but what can I deliver to our members in terms of advocacy if the only information in the public domain is speculation? The following are some examples of information generated by the actions of CNP, PDNPA; supported by other agencies, organisations and celebrities: -

Peak District National Park Authority

- To sell off the Roaches – perceived as creating precedence for other NPA's to follow
- Featured in 2 national BBC programmes on the same day (Countryfile and the Politics Show on Sunday 28 November) offering the same speculation over spending cuts
- Recently visited by Baroness Andrews – who is Vice President of National Parks Association, and also on the House of Lords committee for the Public Bodies Bill. From the Hansard transcripts I have read, appears to be championing NPA's by arguing to have them removed from Schedule 7.
- Notably, deciding not to hold public consultation meetings for the Governance Review

Campaign for National Parks

- Using emotive language in press releases, articles, blogs etc., in relation to spending cuts, which is no more than speculation and no less than irresponsible.
- Showing contempt for Defra's explanation of the spending cuts and governance review by mimicking and publicising their own interpretation of "Myth Busters".
- Showing contempt for the government by forming their own "coalition".
- Claiming that National Parks have been doing "Big Society" for the past 60 years.
- Paying little attention to promoting the governance review and its consultation process.

The list is endless, and I shall not take up more of your valuable time with further examples of 'spin' and 'hype'.

I feel all of this is having a growing negative and conflicting impact upon the public's perception of the governance review, and it could seriously jeopardise its process and outcome should these unfounded and speculative claims be taken seriously. The general public trust that such organisations and celebrity spokespeople are a dependable source of factual information.

We were looking forward to the Localism Bill opening up many avenues for local people to take the initiative; to work together for the good of their communities; to make a difference; to be proud of their surroundings; but most of all to bring out a sense of caring about where we live, work and play. How can this truly happen after the damage caused by the irresponsible behaviour of those who should know better?

I ask that you please have your department look into this situation and give us some assurances that the general public are not being misled in any way which could be construed as influencing (a) their participation in the consultation process or (b) the outcome of the review.

Yours faithfully,

Mrs Sue Baillie
For ONE VOICE

c.c: Desmond Swayne, MP
Dr Julian Lewis, MP