
Final Ministerial Reply



FR088

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From Richard Benyon MP
Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries

Thank you for your email of 24 February enclosing a copy of the conference report, *The "Big Society" and the Environment*, following the North West Environment Link's workshop in October 2010.

I am pleased to hear you note significant enthusiasm for the idea of the Big Society and the opportunities that it presents.

The Government recognises that civil society is a key partner and driver for building the Big Society. Civil society is active in many of Defra's policy areas, and the department has a Civil Society Advisory Board that advises on effective engagement in these areas. The Board brings together a wide range of members of civil society with considerable knowledge and understanding of Defra's agenda. The issues raised in your report are exactly the sort of cross-cutting issues that the Board exists to advise Defra on, so I will ensure that the Chair is made aware of your report.

Defra also works closely with its Social Enterprise Strategic Partnership to explore how it can work better with social enterprises. The partnership is made up of a representative selection of organisations that have a key role in delivering Defra's objectives, such as the Social Enterprise Coalition, Co-operatives UK and the Development Trusts Association.

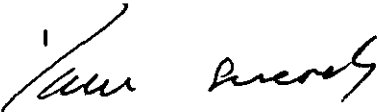

Furthermore, Defra's delivery landscape means it is well placed to work in partnership with others in building the Big Society, e.g. by removing barriers which stifle local action, wherever appropriate, and by bringing decision making closer to communities and individuals.

Many of the recommendations that are set out in your report, therefore, chime with steps that national Government is taking to enable civil society groups to play an even greater role in improving their communities. For example, Defra committed in its Business Plan to encourage and enable communities, civil society, and public and private organisations to contribute further to the enhancement of the countryside, habitats and the environment.

As part of this commitment, we have published proposals to increase the accountability of National Parks and we are reforming key public bodies to transfer more power to people and communities. In particular, British Waterways is to be transferred from government to a new charity for the waterways in England and Wales through the Public Bodies Bill, and the Environment Agency and Natural England will be reformed to make them more customer-focussed.

In addition, Defra launched a national campaign in December to increase tree-planting by the private sector and civil society, including a website where people and community groups can report trees planted.

Finally, one of the Government's key priorities this year is to publish a Natural Environment White Paper in the spring setting out its vision for the future of England's natural environment. The process of developing the White Paper has been accompanied by a wide ranging process of engagement with all the interested parties – individuals, businesses, civil society groups, land managers, scientists and local authorities in a Big Society approach to policy making. The response to that process has been vast, with over 15,000 contributions setting out innovative ideas and local priorities for protecting and enhancing the natural environment. This demonstrates, in common with the feedback from your conference, the extraordinary level of enthusiasm and passion for environmental protection that exists at the grassroots. I hope the White Paper will build on this enthusiasm and I have been heartened by the level of interest in this work. I have passed your recommendations onto the White Paper team for consideration.

RICHARD BENYON MP