

16 July 2008

Martin Smith - BBKA
Michael Sheasby, Vice Chair BBKA
John Home, Chair BFA
Claire Waring - Editor Beecraft

AB/CR

Dear All,

Healthy Bee Plan

It was very good to meet with you all at the Royal Show last week. Thank you for being so candid and open with me in sharing your concerns and hopes.

Given the publication this week of the Public Accounts Committee report, and attendant media coverage, I thought it would be helpful if I were to summarize the points you made to me last week so that we can move forward together in implementing the Healthy Bees Plan.

As I recall them, the points you made to me were:

1. You would like to see greater dialogue and transparency in your relationship with Fera. You are concerned to ensure that the funding allocated to the Healthy Bees Plan and the National Bee Unit (NBU) is spent in the most effective way.

In particular, we need to strike the right balance between the investment in training and knowledge dissemination (and awareness) for more effective bee husbandry (e.g. via expanded bee inspection) and activity to better identify the causes and prevention of disease (e.g. via the enhanced use of BeeBase).

I indicated whilst the overall sum of money was set out in the original business case for the Healthy Bees Plan (which has been shared with you) we are keen to work with you and others, to ensure that the implementation of the Plan is based on a full and shared understanding of all the issues. I also reiterated the commitment of my new agency to work with you in a much more open and less defensive manner than you felt has been the case in the past. To this end I invited you all to see first hand the work of the NBU and the agency, as indeed I have also extended a similar invitation to the chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Bees, to whom I am copying this letter.

2. BeeBase. You expressed concerns about its usefulness to beekeepers, and cautioned whether it was sensible to spend further money on developing it. BeeBase is, of course, central in the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee report.

I believe BeeBase is a unique and key resource for beekeepers, providing information on legislation, pests and diseases, disease incidence and interactive maps, current research areas, publications, advisory leaflets on best practice and key contacts in the National Bee Unit and its inspectorate. BeeBase is also one of the most effective ways to reach the many 1000s of amateur beekeepers.

I expressed my concern that the full power and potential of BeeBase may not be readily apparent to individual keepers and their associations; for example its use, in conjunction with the scientific health work of Fera, allows the NBU to identify areas of emerging disease risk and therefore better targeted bee inspection activity.

I therefore offered you the opportunity to have a full demonstration of its capabilities, so that again, we can work together on how BeeBase is more fully populated and best used for the advantage of everyone.

3. Living With Environmental Change's Insect Pollinator Initiative. You said that you wish to see as much money as possible spent on research into the honeybee, recognising that a proper business case led approach was important, and that given the finite amount of the overall research pot, not all interests may be met in full. As Fera does not form part of the funding consortium for this work our focus is on developing proposals to secure funding under this Initiative.

I welcome acknowledgement in the recently issued call for proposals of the 'knowledge of pollinators that resides with beekeepers and others in the wider "stakeholder" community' and the invitation for beekeeping and other stakeholders to participate in research proposals.

We are still sufficiently early on in the bidding process to consider with BBKA and other beekeeping stakeholders how you might participate in the research proposals that we will be developing. We are certainly aware of the BBKA's research ideas and would welcome the opportunity to further consider these with you from the perspective of developing research proposals for this Initiative. We would therefore be delighted if you could confirm your agreement to working with Fera on proposals.

Indeed, I made the point that it would be more productive for effort now to move from 'campaigning' on the allocation of the funding to constructive dialogue on the Pollinator Initiative, so as to move to action, and research itself!

My point on moving from campaigning to action also applies of course to the Healthy Bees Plan, which Fera is responsible for implementing, and on which we are anxious to start formal engagement with stakeholders, building on informal bilateral meetings over recent months. I am aware that Tim Lovett, with whom I, and others at Fera, have been in dialogue separately, has indicated that he is unable to attend the first meeting of the stakeholder management group for the Plan on 23rd July. I would hope that we can revisit this at the next bilateral with BBKA on 20th which I will be attending.

I trust this summarises the main points we covered last week. Please do let me know directly if you feel that progress in implementing the plan is either inadequately communicated, or insufficiently inclusive. I am keen that we are all seen to be working together on what is widely recognised as one of our most pressing environmental challenges and opportunities.

Yours sincerely,

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