

National LAF Report - April 2014 to March 2015

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Foreword by Natural England

This report summarises the work of Local Access Forums (LAFs) to improve access for all covering the financial year, 1st April 2014 to 31st March 2015. LAF members give their time to make their local area better for everyone, a contribution which might go unnoticed but which provides benefits to lots of people now and future generations. All too often the value of the rights of way network and other greenspaces is not recognised by people and businesses, but the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment ([MENE](#)) tells us that people use their local paths and greenspaces for daily walks and research shows us that this keeps them healthy. MENE also tells us that some people go for longer walks further away from home and they spend money, providing much needed income to rural pubs, cafes and shops.

In this report there are lots of great examples of the work that LAFs do: creating new paths and long-distance routes, connecting-up the rights of way network and promoting access to people that haven't used paths and greenspaces before. There are over 12 pages summarising many of the achievements of LAFs and it is really worthwhile to read them all, but if you are pressed for time in section 3.2 we've highlighted examples which we think illustrate some of the great work of LAFs.

At a time when local authority budgets are reducing, LAFs have been very creative in finding new ways of getting funds: for example one has created a Charitable Incorporated Organisation so that they can apply for funds for long distance trails and associated circular routes. Other LAFs have worked with local planners and developers to embed good access for Non-Motorised Users in new developments – a move which could provide opportunities for regular leisure and exercise for new residents and green transport routes to work, shops and schools. LAFs have not however been so successful in working with Local Nature Partnerships, (LNPs) Local Enterprise Partnerships, (LEPs) Health and Wellbeing Boards (HWB) or local LEADER groups.

There will be continuing challenges for 2016, including working on discovering lost ways before the 2026 cut-off, negotiating with Network Rail about rail crossings, working with developers, further budget reductions in some authorities, working with LEPs, LNPs and HWB and simply finding the time to work with other local stakeholders and organisations. LAFs were also concerned by the loss of the regional co-ordinators after Natural England withdrew its financial support. Natural England will consider what help we can offer to LAFs to support them to meet these challenges including running workshops at the annual conferences in early 2016.

Finally I'd like to thank everyone who gives their time to work on their LAF: whenever I meet LAF members I'm always inspired by the fantastic work you do.

Pippa Langford

Natural England
Principal Specialist Commons and Public Rights of Way
December 2015

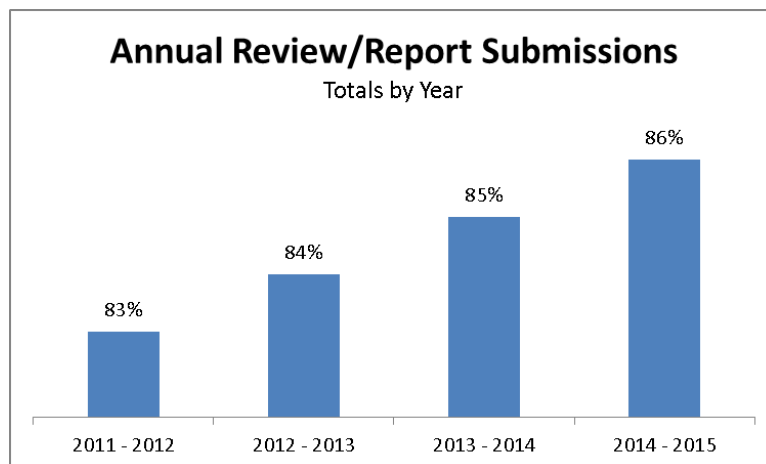
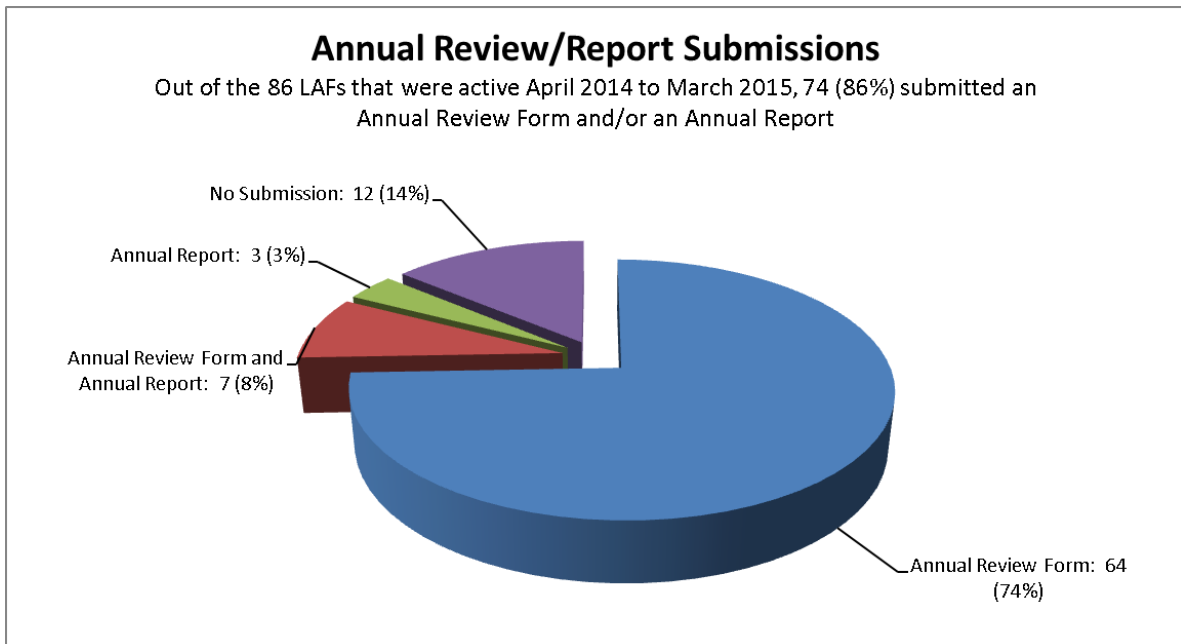
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1. Introduction

Natural England has a responsibility set out in the CROW Act (section 19 of the 2007 regulations for Local Access Forums) to receive annual reports from all LAFs. This report summarises all of the LAF annual reports received covering the period April 2014 to March 2015. The report highlights some of the achievements reported, provides statistics on LAFs and the activities they have undertaken, identifies issues and makes recommendations on improvements that could be made.

LAFs were asked to submit an annual report (preferably by completing an Annual Review Form produced by Natural England in consultation with the LAF Regional Coordinators) to Natural England by the 30th June 2015. In addition we conducted an online survey between 17th April and 8th May 2015 of all of the LAF Chairs and Secretaries and the results of this survey have also fed into this report. All of the charts in this report are prepared from data submitted on the Annual Review Forms or from the Annual Survey results.

The final submission results are as follows:

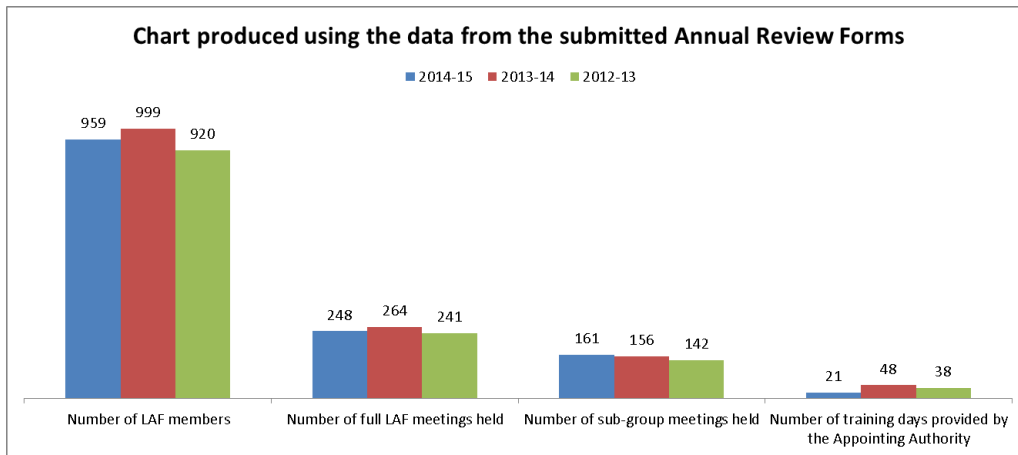


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2. How LAFs operate

Over the year around half of the LAFs (52%, slightly down from last year's reported 59%) retained the same number of members; 23% (up 5% on last year's survey) had increased and 25% had decreased membership.

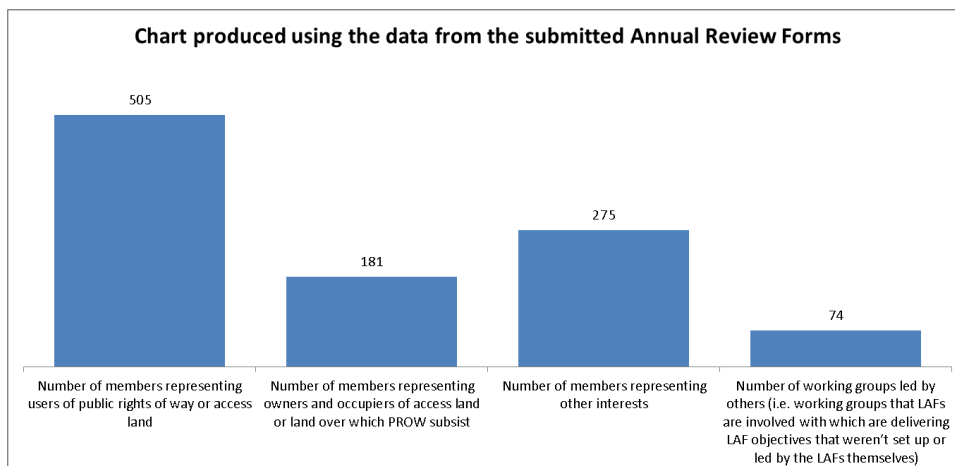
Two thirds of LAFs (up 9% on last year's survey report) met more than 3 times a year and only 10% met less than twice. Virtually all (99%, up 5% on last year) of meetings had more than half of their members attending.



In general LAFs again received good support from their appointing authorities but notably a very small minority (4%) are still not employing a secretary, or funding member expenses (6%), which are required by the legislation that established LAFs (The Local Access Forums (England) Regulations 2007).

Nearly two thirds of LAFs (63%, up 6% on last year's survey report) operated sub groups, who met at variable intervals throughout the year. They again covered a very wide range of topics including matters regarding the operation of their LAF, specific local consultations and strategies and national consultation responses.

From the data provided from the Annual Review Forms, the percentage of LAF members representing landowners accounts for 19% of total members with 7 LAFs (11%) reporting no land owners representation at all.

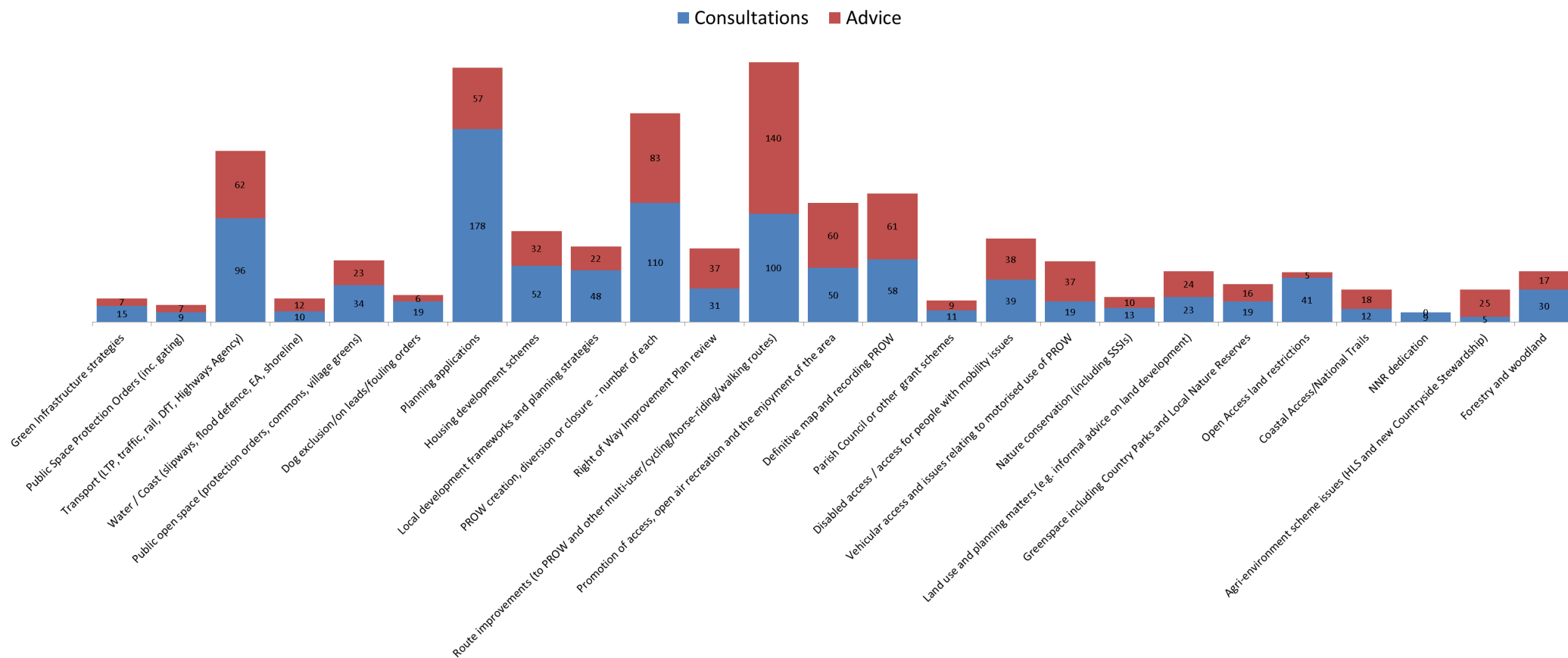


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3. LAF achievements

3.1 Consultations and advice

NB The chart and statistics below were produced using the data provided by the 71 (82% of) LAFs who submitted Annual Review Forms and shows the large number and variety of LAF activity during the year. The chart differentiates between when a LAF is formally consulted or just asked for advice.



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3.2 LAF activities

Examples of LAF activities in their annual reports are wide-ranging. The following is a selection of achievements that have helped to secure access benefits for local communities and projects of particular interest have been highlighted.

Barnsley LAF supported the publication of new and revised walk leaflets including the Barnsley Boundary Walk. Members were also involved in major network improvement projects along with the links to them and the Chair led on investigating a new long distance route as part of a local partnership.

Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol City and South Gloucestershire JLAF produced a short press release regarding the dangers of Neospora and how its spread can be avoided which was sent to local newspapers. The JLAF continued to support the volunteer work parties which were established two years ago and provided advice to a number of bodies through its consultation responses.

Bracknell Forest LAF members attended a Bracknell Forest Partnership event to help raise the profile of the LAF and of its remit to promote public access to countryside in Bracknell Forest for the purposes of open-air recreation and the enjoyment of the area. LAF members and a Bracknell Forest Council officer attended a site visit to Rooks Wood in Wokingham Borough. The purpose of the site visit, which was in conjunction with other local LAFs, was to share ideas about new approaches to managing dogs in the countryside.

The LAF provided important consultation feedback to the Borough Council on a number of matters pertaining to promoting public access to the countryside including; management of Public Rights Of Way, improvements to parks and open spaces and the production of outdoor recreation leaflets.

Working to improve the network: Bracknell Forest LAF continued its work to identify where accessibility of Public Footpaths could be improved by replacing the older 'step over' or 'squeeze' stiles with new metal or wooden kissing gates as set out in the Bracknell Forest Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP). This resulted in the Borough Council working with South East Berkshire Ramblers to carry out the improvements, which were funded by the Ramblers: The gates along Binfield FP16 (off Peacocks lane) were replaced/improved with 2 new wooden kissing gates, which are designed to allow medium mobility; New 'two-way', medium mobility gates were used to replace an old step-over stile along Bracknell FP15 (at junction with EPCC driveway), a single squeeze gate along Winkfield FP4 and another squeeze gate along Binfield FP11.

Bradford LAF instigated and developed the approach the council will take on requests for memorials (including benches, stones etc.) on council-owned countryside. The LAF had ongoing dialog with Senior Highways officers regarding safety of vulnerable users where PRoW meet busy roads and continued to raise the issue of recording public rights of way with the approach of the cut-off date.

Buckinghamshire LAF was successful in lobbying the local district council to enforce the removal of fencing on open access land, achieving easier access to the land from all directions and ensuring better access to the local rights of way network. This has been ongoing for 2 years, but was achieved in this reporting period. Some useful publicity was also achieved through the Open Spaces Society. The chairman attended and contributed in a workshop aimed at improving the future management and promotion of the Ridgeway National Trail. He identified possible joint-working, shared knowledge and helped steer future policy.

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The LAF provided important support to the county council and district council in their ambition to create a new bridleway along a disused railway line at Bourne End under section 26 Highways Act 1980 and provided advice on a Dog Control Order at Burnham Beeches NNR.

Working to improve the network: One of Buckinghamshire LAF's members was active in creating a new mobility scooter route between two rural villages; has tested and given advice on creating additional disabled access routes in the county; and has led a number of rambles for disabled people.

Working to improve the network: Buckinghamshire LAF were successful lobbying the county council highways department to install a pegasus crossing seeking safer access for vulnerable users between two communities in Aylesbury, when the council were otherwise considering returning the s106 money back to the developer.

Rail crossings/Network Rail: Buckinghamshire LAF contributed to a Network Rail consultation on the proposed closure and diversion of 16 crossings on the Princes Risborough to Aylesbury branch line and 26 crossings on the Bletchley to Bicester line in order to improve safety and the response strengthened the case for securing more convenient crossings for the public across these lines.

Bury LAF made good progress towards the creation of a comprehensive Bridleway Strategy. Members of the LAF succeeded in creating a publicised 'Village Link' circular walking route between the communities in the north of the Borough and good progress was made towards the creation of a West Pennine Way.

Cambridgeshire LAF talked with the planners of South Cambridgeshire regarding access for Northstowe. The LAF responded to consultations on: changes to the A14; East Cambs plan concerning building to the north of Ely; the City plan and about the plans for Jesus Green. Members attended meetings about plans for the new cycle bridge over the Cam and wrote letters about the use of Section 106 money in the Trumpington area of the city.

Central Beds & Luton JLAF were involved in the Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC) project, funded by the Natural England Innovation Fund, to quantify the Public Health benefits of the Natural Environment and facilitate partnership development between the JLAF and the Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership.

The JLAF was also involved at an early stage in the East Coast Mainline Level Crossing closure consultation to ensure the best possible outcome for all users and, in the Network Rail East - West Rail link, to ensure that appropriate solutions are found for the sections through Central Bedfordshire.

The LAF inputted into a number of consultations: Luton Local Plan, CBC Rights of Way Maintenance and Improvement Policy, proposed gas fired power station at Millbrook, CBC Dog Control Orders and CBC ROW Standards document - guidance for development. They also advised Luton Borough Council on the draft brief for the consultants who will update the Luton ROWIP.

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Cheshire East LAF

Working to improve the network: Cheshire East LAF succeeded in improving facilities for non-motorised users within the A556 Knutsford to Bowdon Improvement Scheme through negotiation with the Highways Agency. In particular, the LAF secured headroom in an underpass sufficient for equestrians so that the route can be used by walkers, cyclists and horse riders to navigate under the new road.

Publicity: Cheshire East LAF secured publicity on a number of topics through local newspapers. Articles have also appeared in publications of Cheshire East Partnerships, 'LAF News', and the NFU. In addition members promoted the work of the LAF by giving talks to local groups and organisations. The LAF has won the support of several parish councils for its campaign to improve safety for vulnerable users on rural roads.

The LAF also assisted in the production of a new edition of the Cheshire East Walks for All leaflet which gives full details on a number of accessible walks in the countryside. Members submitted numerous suggestions for suitable new walk locations and assisted in the collation of the accessibility information required.

Cornwall Countryside Access Forum (CAF) supported an access improvement scheme carried out under the Paths 4 Communities programme by the National Trust at Penrose Estate, near Helston. The LAF also supported a new footpath link established by the Parish Council on the Anthony Estate in South East Cornwall.

County Durham LAF contributed to the successful opening of their stretch of the England Coast Path, represented access on 3 Rivers LNP, Chaired Bright Water Partnership, bid for HLF Landscape Partnership funding. The LAF also influenced access prioritisation scheme of Durham CC, contributed to the County Durham Local Plan preparation and input into the cycling strategy, Health and Well Being Partnership and North Pennines AONB Access and Recreation Working Group.

Derby & Derbyshire LAF provided a guided walk for the public around some Open Access land to draw attention to the existence of a piece of land that is not often visited. They also highlighted signage and access problems to landowners and the local authority.

Publicity: Derby and Derbyshire LAF publicised access issues and the existence of the LAF to members of the public visiting the annual Woodland Festival at Elvaston Castle. They also designed local guidance and publicity about public access and cattle to help inform local walkers with dogs how to safely access the countryside.

Devon Countryside Access Forum (DCAF)

Working to improve the network: Devon CAF held a site visit to assess the potential for horse use on a short section of the National Cycle Network route (the Granite Way) between Lydford and Bridestowe Station. It was agreed this would be suitable, subject to appropriate signing and alterations to some path furniture. The route has subsequently been opened up by Devon County Council on a pilot basis. This joins a newer section of trail, more recently designed and opened up for multi-use with links to Dartmoor National Park open access land.

The DCAF is keen to see more multi-use routes in accordance with Devon County Council's Rights of Way Improvement Plan policies. A training day was held in East Devon to look at a number of access

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related matters. During a walk a disabled member on the DCAF drew attention to the fact that gates on a well-used level and easy access path were unsuitable for disabled users. There has been much publicity about Neighbourhood Plans with parishes encouraged to participate in the process. The DCAF drew up a position statement to send to parishes to highlight the potential for public rights of way and green space improvements as part of the plan process. This greatly assisted the County Council in responding to requests from parishes.

The DCAF also provided independent advice on opening up a section of cycleway, owned by the County Council, for multi-use. This advice covered the need for consultation with the Parish Councils and affected landowners and suggestions for signing and path furniture improvements.

Dorset, Bournemouth & Poole Joint LAF provided support to Natural England for the ongoing roll out of the Coastal Access route in Dorset. The JLAF encouraged the development of multi-user routes such as the North Dorset Trailway, and the progressive opening up of the old railway line from Maiden Newton to Bridport. They also lead several projects aimed at improving access to the countryside of people with mobility issues.

Rail crossings/Network Rail: Dorset, Bournemouth & Poole Joint LAF played a key role in negotiations with network rail regarding proposed path closures, TRO best practice, walkers welcome scheme, BVPI/performance measures regarding maintenance of PRoW, engaging Volunteers in helping to maintain PRoW, making links between public transport and PRoW, CIL and Coastal Access.

The JLAF was consulted on NE Dog Walkers Guidance, DfT Cycling Delivery Plan, Dorset AoNB Plan, Bournemouth, Dorset & Poole Minerals Extraction Plan, Dept Culture, Media & Sport - Motorsports on public roads.

The joint LAF managed to turn the decision around by Bournemouth & Poole Borough councils from not reviewing/writing their RoWIP and the DLAF being noted in the Dorset LNP publication "State of the Environment" as a partner in its work

The LAF were persistent in their efforts to engage with the H&WBB keen to deliver access/health related initiatives. The Dorset H&WBB is up and running but still establishing itself. However numerous links have now been forged with speakers booked for future meetings to train the members in this area, inform them about various initiatives (e.g. LiveWell Dorset) and consider the role of the LAF in this area of work.

Dudley Borough LAF worked constructively with the Council to help to resolve the long running issue of the Pottery Farm footpath.

East Riding of Yorkshire & Kingston upon Hull LAF worked with one of the appointing authorities to develop and implement a 'Policy for the Use and Management of Unmetalled Highways and Byways Open to all Traffic'. This policy has now been formally endorsed within the last year and the LAF continue to work with the appointing authority to ensure that the policy is put into practice.

During this reporting year the LAF formed a Verges Sub-Group to look at verges as a 'safe refuge for all users'. A high level of engagement with parishes was achieved and potential projects to create better connectivity to PROWs or to create circular walks in villages from a health and wellbeing perspective were identified. Unfortunately due to budgetary restrictions it is unlikely that any of the projects identified to create safer connections or better verge maintenance will be able to be undertaken in the near future.

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The LAF has continued to strengthen their links in the health and tourism sectors and have attended a variety of events to promote the work of the LAF and benefits of access and recreation in the countryside and in our towns and cities. One of the members had articles on access and the benefits of LAF membership published in the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) national magazine, National Farmers Union, Farmers and Growers Weekly and also in the Yorkshire Post Country Week supplement.

East Sussex LAF advised East Sussex County Council in relation to byway management and traffic regulation orders and started discussions on the ROWIP review planned for the following year. They worked with the South Downs National Park Authority and Forum to have an alternative South Downs Way route advertised and

Rail Crossings/Network Rail: East Sussex LAF advised Network Rail (NR) regarding path diversions in Newhaven, Seaford and Rye, achieving likely access improvements in two cases. Proposals to extend HS1 to Bexhill and Hastings have also been discussed with NR at an early stage. The LAF also advised East Sussex County Council in relation to a Southern Water footpath diversion in Telscombe which has led to a suitable compromise for the various parties and advised Crowbrough Common Golf Club regarding access land and signage.

Essex LAF monitored the impacts of reducing PRoW maintenance budget and converted the blanket Byway closures into temporary closures on 5 pilot routes over the winter that formed the basis of an ECC project to monitor the advantages and disadvantages of these closures.

Exmoor LAF concluded its consideration of advice to Exmoor National Park Authority on access for canoeing in Exmoor National Park and an advice document was agreed. Following queries from a member of the public, the LAF reviewed and approved the Authority's signage protocol. The LAF attended site visits to consider surface improvement works in order to integrate advice on the Authority's approach to surfacing into a bespoke Exmoor standard for rights of way and permitted paths.

The LAF also visited access improvements to Porlock Marsh, as part of a project to develop a future vision for the area and a plan for its development, management and use, following the dramatic changes that have taken place since the breach in the shingle ridge in 1996.

As part of its Strategic Overview role of the access-related priorities in the Exmoor National Partnership Plan, the LAF delegated to a sub-group the review of the BVPI trail standard and the development of a bespoke trail standard for Exmoor National Park. The minimum standards for public rights of way and adopted permitted paths in Exmoor National Park was agreed and adopted.

The LAF also received a presentation from the Exmoor Trust and members are keen to learn about the activities of other Exmoor-focussed groups in order to identify opportunities for partnership working and fund-raising towards access-related projects.

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Gloucestershire LAF

Disabled Access: Gloucestershire LAF had Joint working/meeting with Wiltshire LAF to discuss cross border issues at Cotswold Water Park Trust (CWPT), differing Definitive Map Modification Order (DMMO) process in Local Authorities, the Thames Path, LNPs, terminating HLF agreements and access improvements for all. From this, money was secured from the CWP for improvement of a route for people with mobility problems in the CWP and the LAF worked with the Ramblers to arrange and deliver (2014/ 2015). The LAF also set up a sub-group to focus on access for people with mobility problems, aided by the recruitment of a further member representing this group and one GLAF representative who is now a member of the Cotswold Trails Partnership.

The LAF encouraged Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) to look at dealing with some DMMOs through officer-delegated powers as Wiltshire and this is now happening and continued to pressurise GCC to deal with DMMO backlog. GCC now has dedicated officers aiming to process 50 DMMOs over this year and next.

Hampshire Countryside Access Forum (CAF) inputted into the Parish Conference run by the Countryside Service and contributed to the review of the Countryside Access Plan and supported delivery of access improvements through the Small Grant Scheme for Countryside Access.

The CAF, through the PATHH project, investigated historic rights of way, prepared applications for Definitive Map Modification Orders and integrated List of Streets (streets maintained at public expense) data with the Hampshire County Council online mapping of rights of way making this information more freely available to members of the public.

Kent LAF continued their well-founded relationship with Highways regarding improvements to roadside infrastructure for non-motorised traffic and investigated the identification, maintenance and accurate recording of Unsealed Unclassified Country Roads. The LAF started negotiations on improving access to Brockhill Country Park for visitors with mobility problems resulting in improvements to the pathways adjacent to the cafe area. The LAF also produced a booklet of guidance for dog walking in the countryside at a local level.

Lancashire LAF advised on an application to extend the existing wind farm on Scout Moor, commented on the Blackburn Town Centre Movement Plan and worked on the nearly completed revised ROWIP for the next ten years.

Preparing for 2026: Lancashire LAF established a Lost Ways local project to determine unrecorded rights of way before the CROW deadline in 2026 and encouraged the Morecambe Bay Partnership to improve routes which resulted in a new 100 mile cycle route around the Bay.

Leeds LAF continued discussions with Network Rail over level crossing closures at Morley aiming to achieve appropriate alternative routes and improvements to the local PRoW network. They promoted a route to the north of Eccup Reservoir (a SSSI) while balancing Natural England's remits of access and nature conservation and supported the development of the North West Leeds Country Park and Green Gateways - a circular walk linking green spaces in NW Leeds.

Additionally, the LAF supported the Wharfedale Greenway - a walking, cycling, horse-riding route linking Pool, Otley, Menston and Burley promoted by Sustrans and lobbied N Yorks CC to provide

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funds to repair Woodhall Bridge carrying the Ebor Way across the River Wharfe, a shared boundary with Leeds MDC.

Leicestershire LAF undertook a comprehensive review of all Open Access Land and submitted reports to the Access Authority. They approached the various landowners/managers and suggested improvements, including joint site visits, and surveyed country parks, other green spaces and rights of way and reported the findings to the relevant land owners/managers and authorities. This assisted the Access Authority and ensured improved access for the public as well as assisting occupiers with managing the sites.

The LAF advised on strategic plans and frameworks and commented officially on substantial planning applications, especially those that involved impacts on rights of way or afforded opportunities to improve the network. The LAF also promoted Countryside for All, a comprehensive guide to opportunities for people with mobility problems to enjoy the countryside.

Merseyside LAF members represented countryside access across Merseyside at the Ramblers Association AGM hosted in Liverpool. Members also attended the Merseyway coastal path launch event and

Rail crossings/Network Rail: Merseyside LAF successfully campaigned against proposed Network Rail level crossing closure and stepped footbridge replacement at Fishermans Path (Sefton MBC) on accessibility grounds for users with mobility issues.

Mid & West Berkshire LAF issued advice to Wokingham Borough Council on its Greenways and River Loddon projects encouraging provision of access to all user groups, including equestrians. The LAF responded to several planning applications which have the potential to improve public access and responded to 6 access audits to commons and public open space in West Berkshire conducted by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust which has taken over the management of these public open spaces.

Mid Lincolnshire LAF and South Lincolnshire and Rutland LAF

Disabled Access: Mid Lincolnshire LAF and South Lincolnshire and Rutland LAF continued working on the development of a series of 'access for all' leaflets aimed at disabled users and families with pushchairs and it's Disability sub-group has produced an additional four leaflets during the year for Gibraltar Point and Grand and North Parade (Skegness), Westgate Woods (Boston) and Hartsholme Country Park (Lincoln). Each leaflet provides detailed route information describing path surfaces, path gradients and cross-slopes, as well as the location of path infrastructure, parking and onsite facilities.

The LAFs also became increasingly involved in the promotion of wider disabled access in Lincolnshire. The Willingham Woods 'access for all' route was featured in the summer 2014 edition of County News magazine, sub-group members attended the 'Give it Some Buzz' Health and Fitness Show in Spalding and the group produced a slideshow for use in doctors' surgeries to promote countryside access opportunities in the county.

Milton Keynes LAF directed support for a long-term path which will enable an important RoW connection to be made and also campaigned to ensure public access is established on the Beds/Milton Keynes Waterway corridor.

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New Forest Access Forum

Disabled Access: New Forest LAF made successful representations to a Parish Council to make arrangements for access to a recreation ground for those with mobility scooters. Representatives of the LAF attended two Regional LAF Conferences where three papers were read at each describing:

- An initiative in the New Forest National Park to provide various types of specially adapted cycles for use by those with disabilities.
- A recently published set of maps and online information by New Forest Access For All (a local Disability Access Group represented on the LAF), describing risk-assessed walks for those with disabilities, users with wheelchairs and mobility scooters
- An initiative by New Forest Access For All, with support from the National Park Authority and local businesses, to make toilets available for those with disabilities when out in the countryside.

Norfolk LAF

Good Practice: Norfolk LAF achieved charitable status for one of its sub-groups and is now set up as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) called "Improving Countryside Access Together in Norfolk" (ICAT Norfolk). The group will apply for project funds to improve open air recreational public access and have already submitted an application to the Peoples' Health Lottery Fund to make improvements to and enhance a long-distance trail and associated circular routes for the surrounding communities.

A sub-group of the LAF guided the development of The Strategic Review of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) with a wide range of input from other delivery partners. The accompanying action plan sets out a comprehensive range of smart deliverables which will be live and evolving and will be monitored by the LAF. The priority actions will inform the LAF's forward work programme.

The LAF supported the development and opening of the England Coast Path on the North Norfolk Coast and stretch one was successfully opened December 2014.

The LAF had representation on a male mental health partnership project which is in the early stages of developing a logical framework for a bid to the European Social Fund and Big Lottery's "Building Better Opportunities" programme; helping people towards and into employment. Norfolk Trails and Public Health are looking to use the trails and associated access network to provide opportunities for men at risk of or experiencing poor mental health to engage in activities that may help improve their physical and psychological wellbeing.

A National Trail Partnership was set up to help steer the development of the National Trail via the New Deal guidelines and this group will consult and report back to the LAF.

The LAF set up a walking and cycling working group to guide the development of strategy and to deliver projects that improve the walking and cycling offer in Norfolk. The appointing authority, along with other local authorities, has submitted an expression of interest in becoming a cycling delivery partner with central government. The group consists of councillors and officers and will consult and report back to the LAF.

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A joint informal meeting was held between the Norfolk and Broads Local Access Forums to provide an opportunity to share information about and provide input to strategic projects.

North Lincolnshire LAF helped finalise the design of the logo and signage of the route of the Ironstone walk and the route of the Ironstone Trail has moved one step closer with the construction of the new roundabout on the A18 Mortal Ash Hill providing the possibility for a safe crossing point.

The LAF supported: the development of the Ancholme cycleway and the Isle of Axholme Greenways developments, provided ongoing support for the Isle of Axholme Landscape partnership, the development of NLC land at Crowle moors as the Gateway to the moors and for the purchase of Elsham quarry to develop the site as a nature Reserve with Public access.

North York Moors National Park LAF responded to the Department of Transport's Cycling Delivery Plan and to the North York Moors National Park Authority York Potash Planning Application. They also met with Natural England Adviser regarding Coastal Access Report.

North Yorkshire LAF Devised a project to encourage awareness of public rights of way and access to the countryside to be used by primary schools throughout the county. Still on hold due to a lack of finance. Input to the planning stages of major local development sites.

Nottingham City LAF investigated and researched City Centre Lost Ways for definitive map modification orders which resulted in 2 routes being added to the definitive map. The LAF's "Plugging the Gap" project completed in 2014 and resulted in a new timber footbridge across a minor watercourse, linking Colwick Country Park in Nottingham City to a neighbouring housing area in Gedling Borough. The LAF also produced Self-Guided Walking Leaflets and a 2nd walk was added to the walks programme covering Sneinton and Colwick Woods (LNR) which helped raise the profile of the LAF while getting people out and about in Nottingham to discover what's on their doorstep.

Nottinghamshire LAF worked with Nottingham City on the initial plans for a footbridge linking city and county at Colwick Park.

Oxfordshire Countryside Access Forum (CAF) advised on the Rights of Way Improvement Plan Review, assisted in the development of the second RoWIP for Oxfordshire and were involved in the emerging Ridgeway National Trail Partnership and the Thames Path National Trail Partnership.

Peak District LAF was consulted on the NPA's Peak District cycle strategy and its key request of action relating to mountain biking was agreed. The LAF took on a direct role in identifying priorities and actions to implement the Peak District National Park Recreation Strategy and action plan in place of the Authority's former strategic management group.

The LAF was consulted on the action plans for managing motor vehicles on green lanes and off-road routes and the implementation of 4 traffic regulation orders. The LAF also carried out site inspections on 4 priority routes in the Staffordshire part of the National Park.

Peterborough LAF

Rail crossings/Network Rail: Peterborough LAF provided critical input in Network Rail consultations regarding level crossing and rights of way closure proposals affecting the East Coast Main Line through Peterborough. Representatives from Network Rail and their consultant's attended a LAF meeting to deliver a presentation and answer questions.

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The LAF's agenda included Nature Improvement Areas (NIA's), Local Nature Partnerships, planning application consultations and network alterations and had a good cross section of attendees with a keen interest not only in access to ROW/land but also in facilities for cyclists and pedestrians in the wider transport arena.

Plymouth LAF members gave their views on the draft Plymouth Plan which will be a single strategic plan for the city. The plan incorporates the: Local Transport Plan, Local Economic Strategy, Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Sustainable Communities Strategy. The LAF was awarded £50 for their contribution and views.

Redcar & Cleveland LAF influenced the appointing authority's decisions on future PROW resources, and further developed links with Walkers are Welcome initiative. There are now two Walkers are Welcome towns in the Borough.

Rotherham LAF negotiated the proposed routes of a diverted bridleway & new footpath regarding the Hardwick Lane, Vessey Close missing link Bridleway east of the M1 motorway near Junction 33. These were walked and approved by LAF members from walking and horse riding backgrounds and the landowner has agreed to the upgrade.

Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead LAF negotiated a permitted multi-user route to improve horse riding access in Eton and were instrumental in developing the draft Rights of Way Management and Improvement Plan 2016-2026. The LAF worked to resolve cross-boundary issues with other authorities, and linking routes across borders, and provided advice with regard to better approaches to manage dog problems

Sandwell LAF held, in association with the Sandwell Show, a successful fifth annual Six Towns Challenge Event with 26, 18 and 14 miles options in August 2014. The yearly upwards trend in entrants continued with over 100 in the 26 miles challenge. A well supported guided Stride Health Walk was a popular feature. This event originated from a discussion at the LAF and is made possible by a team of 26 volunteers from Sandwell Ramblers. The LAF chair organised the event in conjunction with the Council Events Manager. The Event was sponsored by My Time Active who promote Sandwell Stride Health Walks.

Additionally, several programmed footpath improvements were completed which link cross-borough routes, for example, the long awaited improvements to WB 29 Water Lane which links Charlemont to Sandwell Valley. The LAF also assisted in improving several litter problems and paths in Yew Tree and on the Beacon Way were cleared with the assistance of Serco and the Community Service Team.

Sheffield LAF helped develop: new paths and links under Paths for Communities at Greno Woods & Wigtwizzle Plantation; new bridleways and footpaths to encourage enjoyment of the area at Blackamoor; new bridleway routes and access improvements at Lady Canning's Plantation; new bridleways and footpaths at Burbage Moor; new footpath and cycle links improved access for open air recreation at Parkwood Springs. The LAF also encouraged new green routes and cycle tracks throughout the City assisted with the management of a busy Byway at Houndkirk Road.

Shropshire LAF were active in supporting key projects providing access in Shropshire, for example, Oswalds Trail, Humphrey Kynaston Way, Irresistible Offa, Open Hills Stiperstones & Cordon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme to mention a few. The LAF had presentations from key officers on European Funding LEADER, Local Enterprise Partnerships, SAMDEV & Planning and the effect on access, and the mid wales transmission line project and its potential effect on access. There

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were also reports by officers within the Outdoor Partnerships Team who provided updates on project development, service achievements, ROWIP Review and Volunteering.

Slough LAF continued its liaison with CA Technologies, getting better arrangements in place for improved communications, joint chair meetings initiated by Slough and RBWM LAF's and mushrooming into Berkshire wide meetings. The LAF advised on the Basin Improvements consultation with the Canals and River Trust which led to the LAF providing impetus to plans for interim enhancements at the basin through summer site visits and there is now motivation to join together with Bucks CC for improvements to cross boundary links to country parks via the canal towpath in the east of the borough.

Somerset LAF were consulted on the Natural England Coastal Path and campaigned for the Neroche Path.

South Downs LAF (SDLAF)

Rail crossings/Network Rail: South Downs LAF were consulted on a diversion of a railway crossing in Newhaven, East Sussex. The diversion was necessary to move the definitive line of the path which follows a crossing being built to accommodate new railway sidings. The SDLAF was concerned that stiles were being used rather than more accessible gates. Although there was no evidence of any incidents at the crossing, Network Rail insisted that making the route more accessible would increase the risk of accidents. This prompted the SDLAF to write to the Office of Rail Regulation to ask whether Network Rail staff were correctly interpreting its guidance on rail crossings. The reply suggested that Network Rail staff had, in this instance, been overzealous in their approach to reducing risk and should have explored other options fully, as their guidance advises, before refusing them. The SDLAF will continue to challenge Network Rail on its use of inaccessible stiles at this location and throughout the National Park.

The SDLAF gave its views on alternative routes of the South Downs Way including those leading into/out of Winchester, a route onto the cliffs at Birling Gap and a route diverting through Rodmell. As the independent "critical friend" of the South Downs Way the LAF also helped shape the new South Downs Way Management Plan which will be published online.

Multiuser routes: After becoming aware of conflicts between horse riders and users of a mountain bike trail in Steyning, the SDLAF wrote to the landowners to urge a negotiated solution allowing all users to enjoy the trail without endangering each other. The SDLAF made recommendations to two local authorities to dedicate authority owned land, or seek dedication of privately owned land, as public bridleway on two promoted multi-user routes. The routes, Centurion Way and the Meon Valley Trail, are being improved or extended through Department for Transport funding.

The SDLAF attended two site visits to look at Access Land restrictions to be made for public safety; one for a bull being present for part of the year and one for a dangerous chalk pit. Members assessed the impact of the restrictions on the ground and met the applicants who explained their land management needs. The SDLAF advice was to make the restrictions but to explore long term management options which would reduce the extent of, or remove the need for, restrictions.

Staffordshire, Stoke on Trent & Wolverhampton Joint LAF continued to be actively represented on Stoke City Council's Green Door Project Management Group which meets monthly. This initiative seeks to encourage people, particularly the elderly and disabled, to make more use of the green

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spaces in the city. To date approximately 6000 residents have taken part in Green Door activities including cycling, walking, archery, gardening, dancing and relaxation.

High Speed 2: The LAF's members continued to take a special interest in the development of HS2's proposals for a high speed rail link through Staffordshire. They made representations in support of Staffordshire County Council's petition to Parliament regarding the need for additional design refinements in order to mitigate the adverse effect of the proposals and the petition was successful. Subsequently, the LAF met again with representatives of the company and received updates on the progress made regarding the route.

Suffolk LAF met the county council and Network Rail to demand an accessible alternative be provided should the level crossing at Gipsy Lane, Needham Market, be closed, and secured a commitment to do so. They also advised the county council and EDF energy on protecting and enhancing public access in the proposed Sizewell C nuclear power station and Natural England on open access restrictions and the dedication of higher rights on National Nature Reserves.

Members of the LAF attended the opening of the A11 non-motorised user underpass, for which the LAF had campaigned for. The LAF also supported the work of officers and councillors in the organisation of Suffolk Walking Festival, encouraging physical activity for health and education, and promoting and increasing use of the ROW network and presented its annual report to Suffolk CC Cabinet and received praise for its work.

Surrey Countryside Access Forum produced a list showing the extent of anomalies and gaps in the rights of way network in Surrey which, if unresolved, would result in cul-de-sac ROW at the cut-off date in 2026. The LAF responded to consultations about the proposed disposal of an area of common land by Waverley Borough Council, works on common land relating to the Magna Carta celebrations at Runnymede, and plans to extend parking onto common land at St. John Lye, Woking. The LAF also contributed to the Rights of Way Improvement Plan Review and were asked to lead on developing a Rural Cycling Delivery Plan.

Tees Valley JLAF (TVLAF)

Partnership project: TVLAF played a key role in the development of the Heritage Lottery Funded Partnership programme, 'River Tees Re-discovered' project, pulling together the relevant officers and volunteers critical to the project's success. Doug Nicholson, Chair of River Tees Rediscovered, said: "The River Tees is the greatest natural asset in the area and this will be the first time it has been developed as a whole. We view this project as a real opportunity to change perceptions about our river and our area, to look through fresh eyes at the beauty and drama of the landscape today and to celebrate this great asset at the heart of Teesside."

TVLAF was also involved with a successful bid to Paths for Communities and joint work with Elwick Parish Council and a circular path through the creation of two new public foot-paths will be developed around Elwick village linking footpaths and routes to neighbouring villages and into Hartlepool. TVLAF also supported steps to extend the England Coast Path route from North Gare at Hartlepool across the Tees Estuary to link with the Cleveland Way.

Telford & Wrekin LAF continued running volunteer working groups to do path clearance tasks and individual members took on specific rights of way issues and dealt with them as their specific project.

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Torbay LAF undertook a site visit to a recently reopened area on the seafront (the Banjo) and fed back that disabled access to the lower area had been overlooked which resulted in ramps being provided.

Tyne & Wear LAF advised local planning authorities on development applications affecting existing access routes and /or with potential for developer contributions for access improvements. E.g.: corrections to Developer Design Guidance , pointing out errors, pointing out ROWIP priorities and actions, and requests for details of proposed new section of Tyne Riverside walkway. There was also participation in 4 consultations for non-motorised users on A19/A184 junction improvements, leading to better arrangements for NMU crossings and routes. The changes enabled potential route linkages and a new through route. The LAF also responded to consultation on DfT Cycling Delivery plan and promoted improvements to Tyne and Wear Heritage Trail.

Wakefield LAF input into planning applications, specifically the Wakefield Eastern Relief Road where there was concern about crossings of the new road and the Deanfield opencast application where circular routes were secured following LAF input. The LAF also identified new rights of way signage as part of a pre-Christmas walk.

Walsall LAF continued for a 2nd year with volunteers from the Ramblers assisting with path clearance and installation and repair of infrastructure and signs and way markers allowing for a greater distance of paths to be improved on a lower budget. This allowed a greater number of improvements with the limited resources compared to previous procedures.

Good practice: Walsall LAF established systems were put in place to allow LAF members to comment on planning applications, policies and strategies from early stages, helping to secure improvements to the network and good quality design on new or existing public rights of way or open spaces. The LAF also made links with officers dealing with Highway Development Control allowing improved consultations with Planning Officers and developers.

Rail crossings/Network Rail: Additionally, Walsall LAF considered Network Rail proposals for closing level crossings, affecting public rights of way and access to open space and the consultation response discouraged a proposal which would have resulted in significant loss of access.

West Sussex LAF responded to various consultations; most importantly on West Sussex CC's review of its PROW inspection cycle. They also responded to Local Plan consultations which resulted in most now including good statements on access.

Improving the network: West Sussex LAF Contributed to projects on the ground, in particular: - ensuring completion of strategic non-motorised user routes and underpass delivered as part of the A23 widening project. This would not have happened without the LAF involvement. The LAF had a representative on the stakeholder group which monitored final delivery of new footpaths and bridleways as part of the EA's Medmerry coastal realignment scheme. WSLAF's initial involvement negotiating with landowners to create a new bridleway enabling an existing underpass to be used secured a safe alternative crossing of the A283 for the Downs Link multi-user route. Phase 1 of the scheme was delivered in 2015.

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Worcestershire LAF reviewed and updated the RoWIP and held a subgroup to review the County Council's performance against key performance indicators in the Action Plan. They also helped the County Council to develop a new operating procedure for temporary closures of PRoW.

Following the introduction of the Countryside Services report, the LAF commented and advised on how the capital budget for RoW has been spent, and discussed and advised on issues that came to light. The LAF also had presentations and opportunities to comment on the South Worcestershire Development Plan, the Green Infrastructure Strategy, the Cycling Delivery Plan and various sustainable transport schemes.

Yorkshire Dales Access Forum worked through various advisory groups who facilitated discussion between a wide range of users to reach consensus on access issues including temporary voluntary 4x4 restrictions on some routes and access for caving.

4. LAF communication

4.1 Huddle: internet based network to share information

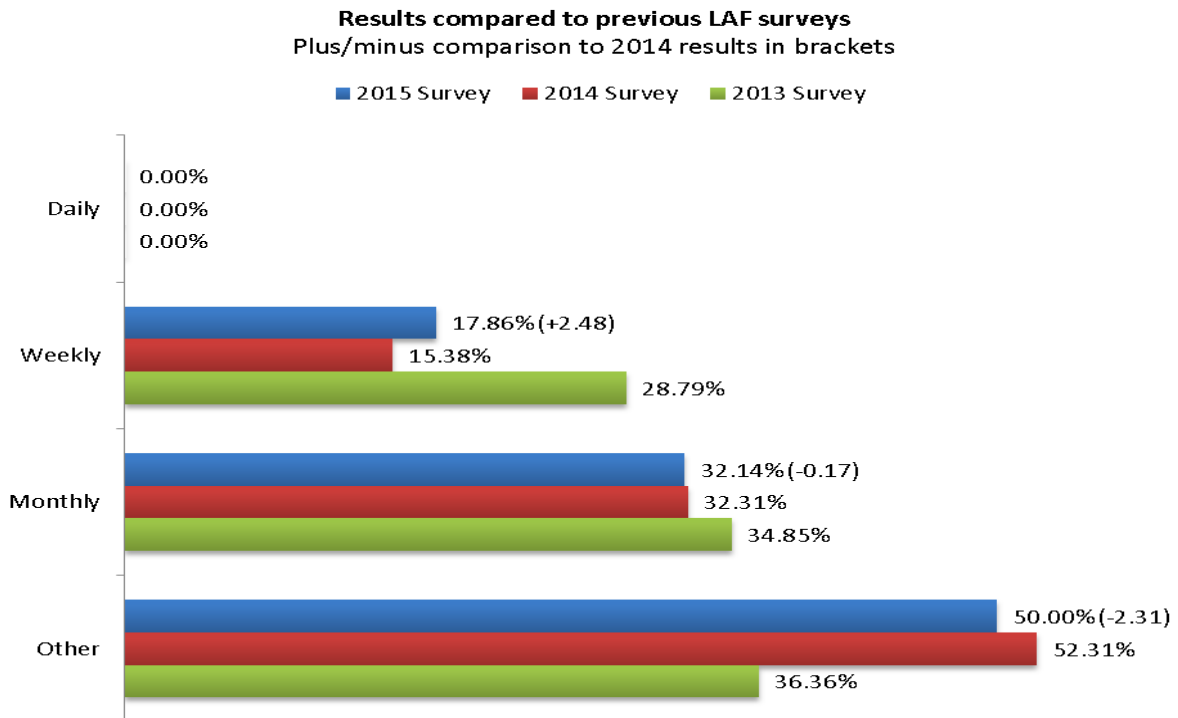
The LAF workspace on Huddle was set up and managed by Natural England to help LAFs to work together and share good practice, as well as to facilitate communication with Natural England and Defra. The annual survey of LAF Chairs and Secretaries confirmed that Huddle continues to provide an important mechanism for supporting the LAFs.

On a couple of occasions over the year, Natural England contacted LAF Huddle members who had been identified as being potentially 'inactive' and whether they still required a Huddle licence. Any members who either didn't respond or replied to say they no longer needed a licence were removed from the workspace. By the end of the year the number of LAF members using Huddle had slightly decreased to 266 (280 reported last year, 244 the year before) with 91% of LAFs represented (98% last year, 95% the year before). On average each LAF had 3 representatives using the LAF Huddle workspace.

In the annual survey, most respondents rated Huddle's ease of use as being very good to satisfactory (77%, a 5% improvement on last year). LAF Chairs and Secretaries reported that they mainly accessed Huddle monthly (32%, same as last year) with 17% checking the site weekly (up 2% on last year's reported 15%) and 50% less than monthly or never (52% last year).

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Frequency of Huddle Use



Most survey respondents feed information from Huddle to their LAF at meetings but this is fewer than reported last year (34% compared to 42% last year) with many more now using email to circulate information (22% compared to 12% last year). Respondents who say they don't feedback information from Huddle to their LAF has gradually decreased to 12% (17% last year, 21% year before).

There was a 4% increase from last year's results in confidence to join in on Huddle discussions though a 5% drop in confidence to upload files or amend whiteboards. As last year the individual sections on Huddle were mostly rated very good to satisfactory.

Following feedback from the LAFs in previous surveys, Natural England worked to produce a suite of guides for LAFs called the LAF Toolkit, produced as PDF documents which LAFs could circulate electronically either via Huddle or as email attachments. The Toolkit was mostly rated very good to satisfactory (90%, compared to 79% last year on the Best practice Whiteboards) in the annual survey.

The results of the survey indicate that although the Huddle workspace is still well used by LAF members who are feeding information from Huddle to their LAFs, more work and consultation with Huddle members needs to be done to improve the confidence of users to make best use of the facility.

4.2 LAF conference

In feedback received in the survey responses and comments in the Annual Review Forms, many LAFs noted their disappointment that a national LAF conference wasn't held in 2014-15. In the latter half of the year, Natural England, in consultation with the LAF Regional Coordinators, began drawing up

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plans to hold a single national LAF conference in London in February 2015. The programme for the 2015 LAF conference was slower to develop than hoped and it looked like there would be difficulties in being able to pull together a full and varied event. This consideration combined with budget pressures, led to the hard decision to postpone the conference for that year.

4.3 LAF Newsletter

During 2014/15 Natural England again produced the newsletter (LAF News) and issued three editions. The newsletters included articles on the Deregulation Act, Dogs in the countryside, Health and Wellbeing Boards and numerous examples of LAF good practice.

5. Engagement with other bodies

LAFs have been encouraged in recent years to develop wider partnerships with Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs), Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs) and Health and Wellbeing Boards (HWB).

Working with other local partnerships was a theme of a workshop at the 2014 LAF conference and Natural England has supported LAFs in their efforts to engage with these bodies by producing the LAF Newsletter and circulating it to all LNPs; including articles in the LAF newsletter on these groups; writing directly to the LNPs to encourage them to work with their LAFs; producing LAF toolkit sections with links and guidance.

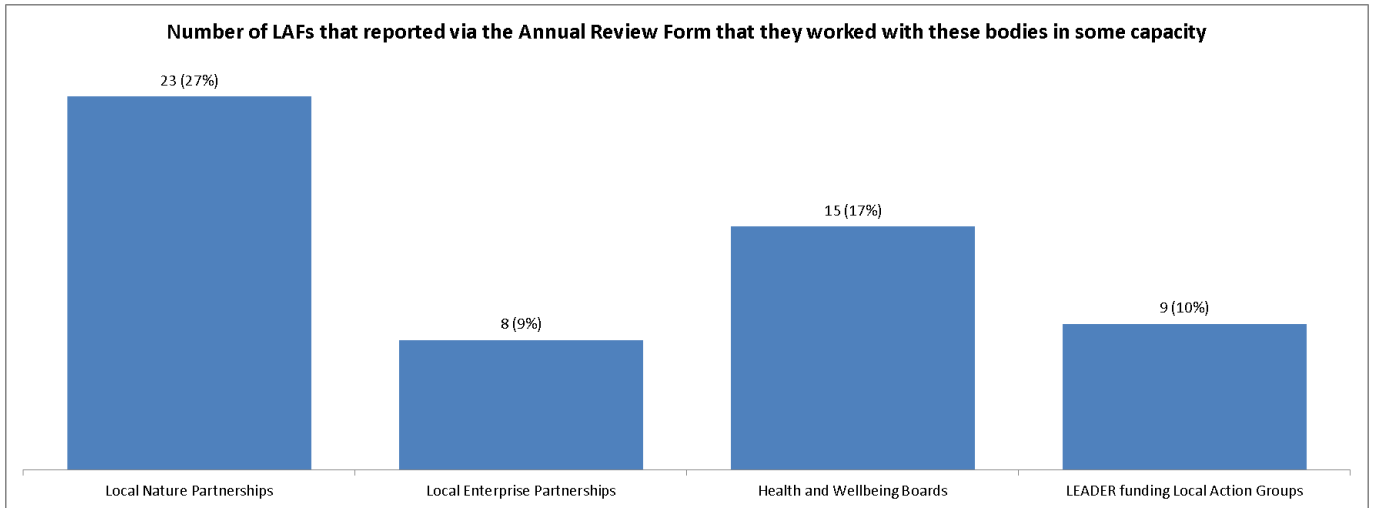
Results from the LAF survey showed that only 43% (down 8% from last year's reported 51%) of the survey respondents reported that their LAF had written to their LNP with just 25% (down 18% from last year's 43%) reporting a follow-up meeting though 11% (up 6% on last year) stated that they had worked on a joint project with an LNP.

Only 10% of the survey respondents (down 3% on last year's 13%) reported that their LAF had had written communication with a LEADER Local Action Group and only 4% (down 9%) reported having a meeting. There were no reports of any joint working with Local Action Groups (5% last year).

Written communication with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) was reported by 15% of the survey respondents (down 2% on the 2014 survey), only 4% reported any meetings and no joint working was reported.

Roughly a quarter (24%) of LAFs had engaged with Health and Wellbeing boards through written communication, 15% (down 5% on last year) reported engagement via meetings and 8% (down 4%) reported joint working.

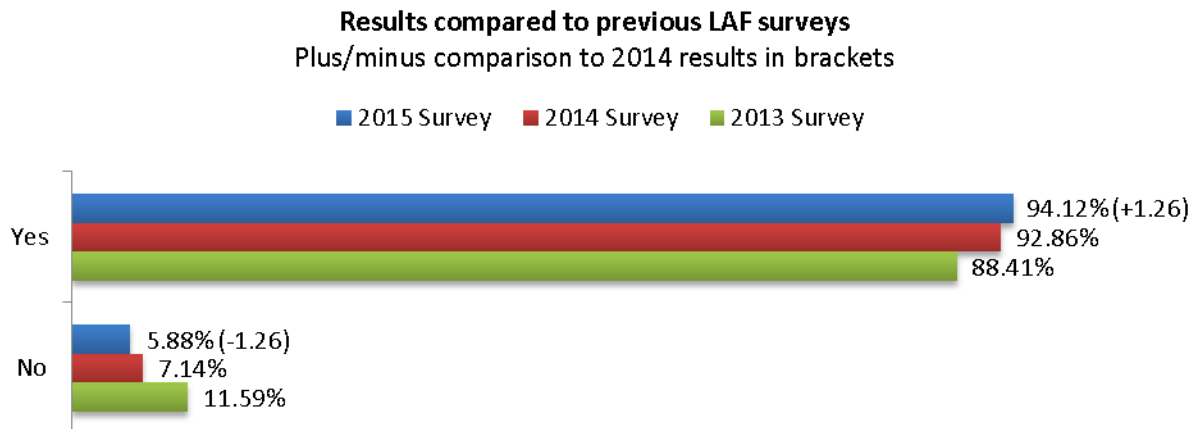
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6. Links with Natural England

The majority of respondents to the LAF survey reported that they knew their local Natural England contact (94%, an increase of 1% from last year's survey).

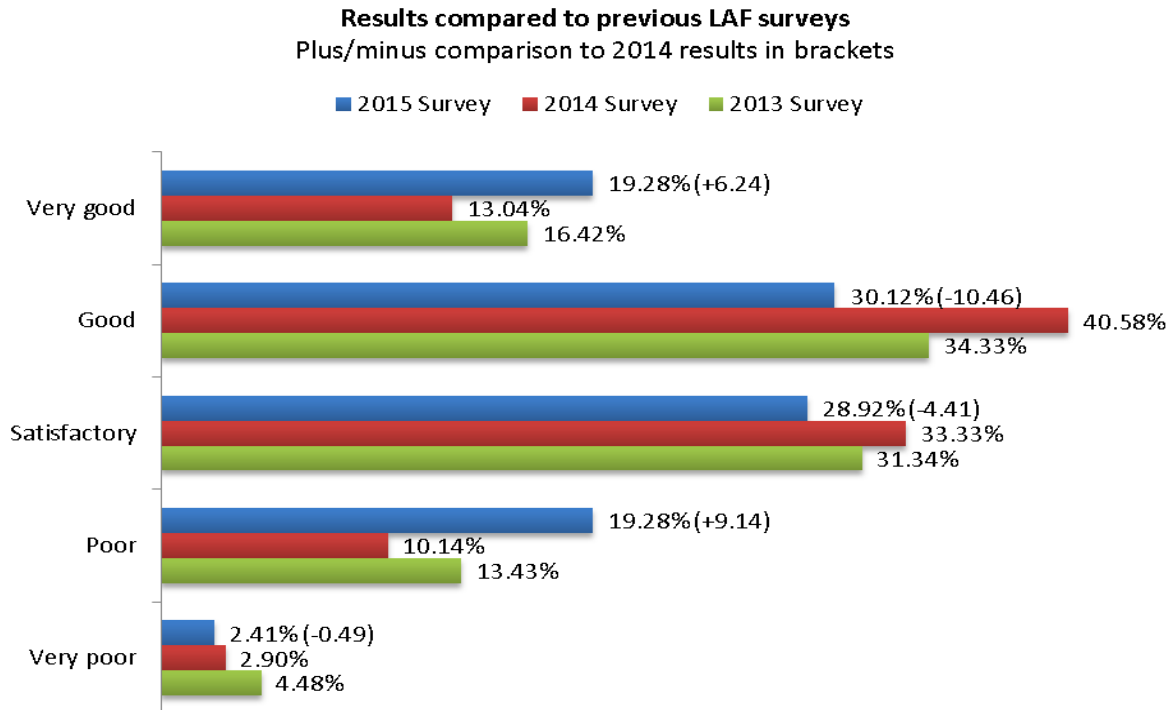
LAFs that know their local Natural England officer



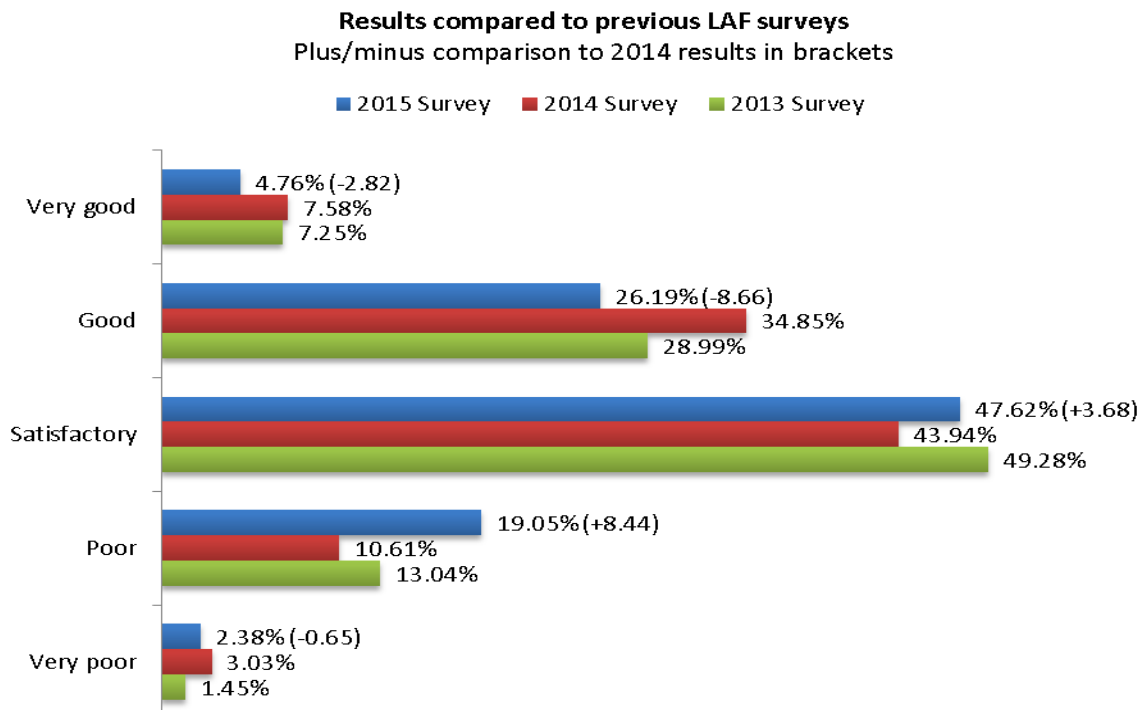
Most survey respondents said that both the local and national support they received from Natural England was very good to satisfactory (78%/79% respectively) though this was down from last year's results:

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Quality of local Natural England support



Quality of national Natural England support



Some of survey responses may give an indication why some of the respondents rated Natural England's local and national support as poor to very poor and included not enough direct contact from Natural England staff; more consistency wanted in staff roles making communication with

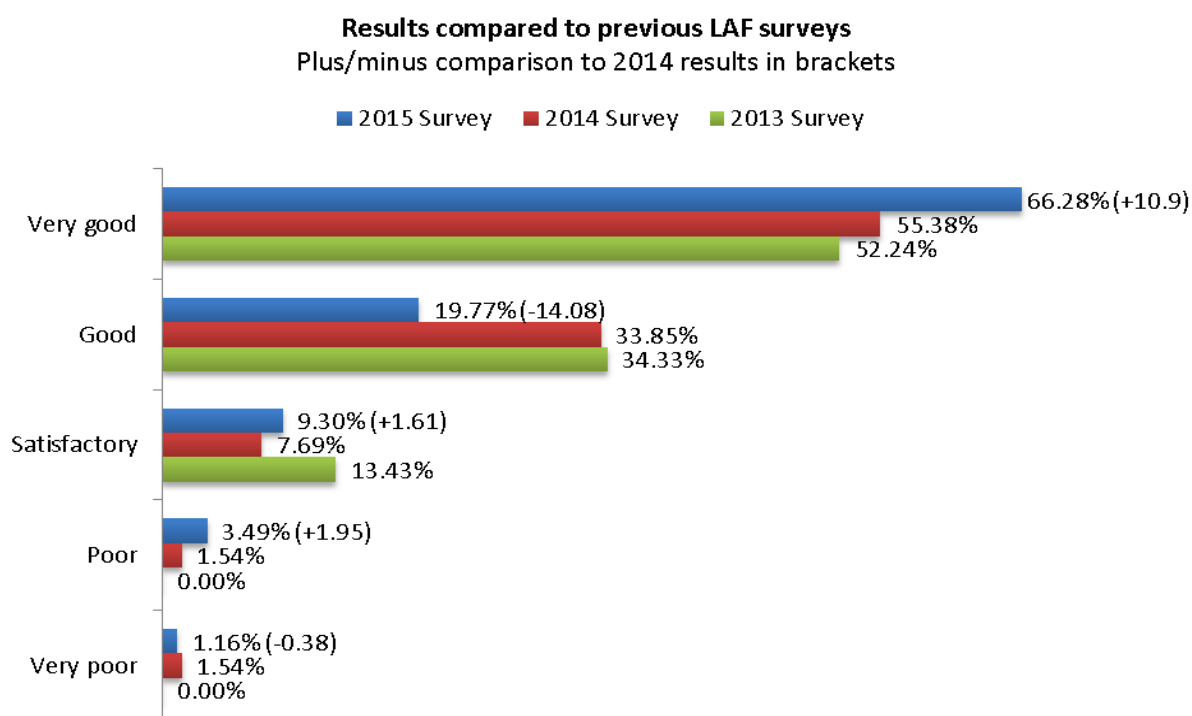
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Natural England more difficult; national conferences not held that year; funding for Regional Coordinator posts cut.

Suggestions to improve this support included that Natural England should improve communication with LAFs, develop mechanisms for raising awareness of consultations and produce more guidance and information on who does what in all relevant Natural England teams.

The work of the Regional Coordinators was rated very similarly to last year's survey with the vast majority (95%) saying that the support they received was very good to satisfactory.

Quality of regional Natural England support



Due to having to reprioritise its work and support for LAFs in the light of ever more stringent funding, Natural England were not able to renew the Regional Coordinator contracts beyond the 31st March 2015.

7. Advice and guidance

The majority of LAF Chairs and Secretaries were aware of the Defra guidance (98%) and use it (89%) which is virtually the same result and figures as last year's survey. Most (59%) reported that they feel it doesn't need to be revised but more than half (55%, much more than last year) say it does need to be revised to:

- Include working with LNPs, LEPS, LAGs, HWWB
- How sub-groups operate;
- Clarity on the Working of larger joint LAFs
- Update parts of the guidance that are now out of date

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Similar to the results from last year's survey, the majority (91%) know of the LAF handbook, and most (56%) use it. Following suggestions from last year's survey to produce guidance in PDF form, the LAF Toolkit on Huddle is being developed and was mostly (90%) rated very good to satisfactory. Suggestions included to continue to develop the toolkit and include as much of the handbook as is still relevant and to add sections on LEPs and LAGs.

The number of LAFs receiving training for new members by their local authority was reported to be up (46%, up 6%). As last year, the training was rated mainly good to satisfactory. The results also show that most appointing authorities (90%) have paid for a LAF member to attend national conferences. The majority (81%, up 5% on last year) responded to say that Natural England should organise more face to face training for LAFs. The type of training required ranged from How to Chair a LAF/LAF Operation, recruitment strategies, ROWIPs. Conference workshops were suggested as a possible way to deliver this training nationally.

8. Reporting process

The clarity and ease of use of the annual reporting guidance and Annual Review Form produced by Natural England was rated at very good to satisfactory by nearly all (99%) of the survey respondents and most (83%) saw the benefit in using the Annual Review Form. Again, nearly all (96%, up 5% on last year's survey results) rated the annual reporting process overall to be very good to satisfactory. Respondents suggested that Natural England should continue to develop and improve the annual reporting process and suggestions included that the form should be adapted to allow spell checking and more clarity on what is required in the consultations/advice section.

9. Issues and challenges identified by LAFs

The Annual Review Form again provided LAFs with an opportunity to list some of the challenges they face along with their suggestions and ideas to help with these in the future. They included:

Appointing Authority budget cuts / insufficient resources

Nearly all LAFs reported that the main challenge facing them is cuts in funding to their Appointing Authorities resulting in:

- Restructuring in the authority
- Less time and support for LAF meetings and projects
- LAFs provide advice but frequently no change can be implemented due to finance
- Lack of capacity in the local highway authorities including the capacity to progress new paths
- PRow improvements have to be agreed by District Council controlled Local Highway Panels, and are therefore in competition with all other Highway projects for available funding
- No funding available for non-statutory improvement work.

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- With only the minimum meetings a year allowed by the authority, LAFs are limited in the range of issues they can address.
- No RoW officer or poor officer attendance
- Reduced public sector finances and a reluctance for external funders to support work on the statutory rights of way network

Time / workload

- Insufficient meeting time to adequately consider agenda items
- Volunteer time commitments for activities between LAF meetings
- New house building in the area resulting in a high quantity of consultations to deal with
- Process for handling Definitive Map Modification Orders (DMMO) appears to be poor and progress is often slow and not readily visible to the LAF

Engagement and promotion issues

- Efforts at building links with LEPs have met with little success to date
- LAFs still struggle to persuade local planning teams to engage with them
- Approaches to English Heritage, National Trust and Wildlife Trust have all been ignored
- Lack of consideration of the role and value of LAFs by most 94(4) bodies, and therefore lack of consequent involvement
- Need better and much wider awareness of role and need to improve performance on ROWIP priorities

Recruitment issues

- Not enough members or missing groups (e.g. landowners)
- Need to appoint proactive members who have the determination, skills, ability and free time to become involved with campaigning and engaging with members of the public, other groups/societies and public bodies
- Not sufficient landowner/manager representation and those we have managed to attract to the LAF have tended not to remain for long
- Finding positive minded, landowner/manager individuals to act as access ambassadors and who do not expect 'quick fixes' is difficult

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- No Chair, urgently need to recruit

Other issues

- Need to broaden the issues considered by the group, with less focus on the 'old chestnut' issues
- Decisions by Network Rail to close PRow railway crossings without adequate discussion and without providing suitable alternative routes
- The notable absence of any NE representative at our meetings over the past year affects our ability to be kept up to speed on wider matters outside the LAF of which we should be aware

Opportunities and suggestions

- Regional meetings of LAF Chairs provided an opportunity to exchange good practice and learn of initiatives elsewhere in the region. It would be useful for this to continue
- National Conference – for good-practice sharing and learning
- Promote the work of the LAFs

Natural England are responding to these issues where possible, for example by continuing the production and circulation of the LAF newsletter to celebrate the successes and raise the profile of LAFs with a wider group of bodies, and through arranging LAF-run workshops on recruiting members at the proposed 2016 LAF conferences. Natural England is also supporting LAFs to share good practice through Huddle and facilitating regional LAF Chair meetings where possible.

10. Appointing Authority feedback

The Annual Review Form also provided the Appointing Authorities with an opportunity to comment on their LAF and its work. Out of the 71 Annual Review Forms submitted, 62 (87%) included comments from the LAF's Appointing Authority.

LAFs are valued

The vast majority of comments from the Appointing Authorities were very complementary about the LAFs and the work they did over the year. Some examples:

- LAFs supportive of the work within the authority, offering ideas and projects as well as more independent action for improvements and proposals
- Continue to welcome input, advice and support from the LAF bringing a range of different users viewpoints and ideas on items to ultimately deliver greater public access
- LAF continues to act as a 'critical friend' to the Authority

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- LAFs well attended and enthusiastic and the members work proactively to exploit opportunities for improving countryside access whilst balancing the range of interests affected by such access
- Useful and valued advice and the LAF continues to closely scrutinise the work of the ROW maintenance team
- Meetings are relaxed, friendly and productive, each member given an opportunity to make their comments/get their point across and new members are fully welcomed and find their feet quickly
- Useful in advising, in particular regarding memorials on public land and vulnerable users
- The lobbying and advice from the LAF has been excellent and resulted almost invariably in successful outcomes
- Welcomes the support, advice, inspiration and enthusiasm that members of the LAF bring to meetings
- The LAF continues its important role in contributing to the National Park Partnership Plan both as a delivery partner and as a Strategic Overview Group to monitor progress against the partnership plan priority
- The LAF continues to be of great value to the appointing authorities for the depth of knowledge and balanced advice it is able to provide
- We welcome the advice from the LAF on the huge variety of access issues covered especially support on contentious issues, such as the recent Network Rail level crossings closures
- Appreciate the range of knowledge and experience of LAF members and takes their comments into account in relation to a wide range of issues including matters relating to planning, highways, the environment, health plus access and recreation
- A testament to their continued dedication and hard work in assisting and delivering broader access in the county
- Their enthusiasm is relentless and they proactively seek upcoming issues to keep abreast of what is planned within the area, actively questioning and offering their support where necessary
- They are dedicated individuals whose time and efforts are much appreciated
- The LAF is highly valued and is seen as an important asset in the management of countryside access
- Collaboration between the LAF, the appointing authority and organisations such as the Ramblers has been productive, agreeable and effective

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- Members of the LAF are keen to get involved in projects in areas such as health and wellbeing and green infrastructure and are making a lot of very useful suggestions as to what we might include in local priorities and as part of their forward work programme
- Such is their commitment and desire to drive things forward, and we, in turn, always attend with at least one officer who is equipped to advise and assist in their endeavours: a symbiotic relationship the authority would not be nurturing were this not the case
- The LAF continues to thrive and provide an active forum for debate and information on plans to improve access in the National Park. Commitment from members is shown to be high by the high level of attendance at full meetings and the regular sub-group meetings which look in more detail at items of interest to members
- Membership is still over-subscribed and a good balance of recreation/land management is achieved
- Advice from the LAF is balanced and reasonable and is maintained at a strategic level
- We appreciate the co-operation, support and advice received from the LAF over the past year, particularly in their detailed consideration of the HS2 proposals and look forward to working with them over the current year
- Their continued support, time and effort is valued. The benefits and cost savings which are currently being achieved will continue to play an important role in service delivery and will be further explored within this changing economic environment

Appointing Authority budget cuts / insufficient resources

- We are aware that LAF members find it frustrating that it is difficult to implement their recommendations due to a reduction in both staff and budgets.
- The LAF struggled to make an impact over the last year in the context of continuing cuts to local authority budgets
- Work to progress other access related projects and deliver schemes on the ground has meant that it has not always been possible to give the LAF the staff resources it needs
- There is a good relationship between the Authority and the LAF, but there's need for further support, training and resource. Due to the current climate the Authority's priority and focus is looking after definitive rights of way, unfortunately this makes it difficult to support wider access projects raised and promoted by the LAF and others
- With the increasing financial and resource constraints on the authority, the secretary is struggling at times to get papers out two weeks before the meeting and this needs to improve. Members understand the constraints that affect the PROW team and rangers in carrying out their work

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Time / workload

- Further project work is limited by the amount of time members can commit to working outside the normal meeting schedule
- Concerned that the members (who all have very active roles in their relevant groups, societies and employments plus their normal full family lives) might feel under pressure to take on more which with effect their health and wellbeing and cause them to "burn out" and leave these groups all together

Engagement and promotion issues

- There is a good working relationship between the LAF and the officers of the Authority, though there are still challenges in terms of securing recognition for the role of the LAF amongst some senior officers
- Engagement from LAF lacking - difficulty in getting advice or action

Other issues

- There is still a general misunderstanding amongst some LAF members about the relationship between the Councils and their officers and the LAF . The LAF is an independent body with an advisory remit. The Councils' responsibilities are to ensure that the LAF has the ability to meet with a suitable balance of interests represented in the membership and to provide administrative/secretarial support to the LAF. While officers often attend meetings to support the LAF, members should appreciate they do so in an advisory capacity only. Officers are of course always interested in receiving reports and/or advice from the LAF
- Concern regarding turnover of members and lack of permanent Chair leading to lack of continuity for LAF
- LAF mostly inactive over the year but the Appointing Authority sees the importance of LAFs and is working hard to reactivate
- Issues do take time to resolve, which is the nature of rights of way problems

Opportunities and suggestions

- Budget cuts: One possible solution to this would be if the group were willing to become a constituted group which would allow for the group to apply for funding to carry out projects working in partnership with the Council
- Over the last year the work of the LAF has focussed on making detailed responses to the many consultations on new development areas currently being planned. For the coming year we need to follow up on these to make sure that comments are taken on board and we see some delivery of access priorities.

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- The problem for the LAF and for the Council is how to turn all of that enthusiasm into improvements to countryside access . By waving the flag for countryside access, maintaining their strategic approach and by working with other groups engaged in the same dilemma of how to deliver improved outcomes with shrinking budgets, the LAF can continue to have a significant impact on how countryside access changes in the future
- Where previous members had turned down the opportunity for formal training current members have requested training in certain aspects of their work. We are currently working together to determine the best methods to deliver this
- Keen to arrange training if required
- In an attempt to combat the lack of time the new Chair and Vice Chair recently introduced a series of monthly workshops. As the workshops are informal and require no published agenda, papers or minutes it is hoped that they will not impose too much burden on officers. The workshops will however, enable identification issues upon which the LAF may need to comment and enable discussion on matters not relevant to the LAF
- LAF members may benefit from information and experience of how other LAFs operate

Support from Natural England

- As secretary/coordinator I appreciate the support of NE - especially with regards to specific LAF related queries but also for wider LAF related information
- Members welcomed the attendance of their area NE Officer at the last meeting

11. Conclusions and actions

There are many examples in this report of the positive contribution that LAFs make to access in their area through working with their Appointing Authority and others. However there are also LAFs that are struggling to have much impact, often citing budget or staff reductions in local authorities as the reason for a lack of progress. Natural England would like to better understand what it is that some LAFs do that enable them to make things happen so that we can share this knowledge widely. This report gives us some indicators of the factors that make LAFs more effective, but the picture is far from clear: it is our intention to investigate these factors more fully in next year's survey. The section below outlines what we know now and the actions Natural England will take in 2016/17.

LAF membership has remained steady but there remains an issue with a lack of landowner representatives on some LAFs. This is disappointing but we don't know how much this is a factor which affects the outcomes that LAFs achieve. Natural England will continue to encourage landowners to join and become active members of LAFs and we will also endeavour to find out through next year's survey the impacts from the lack of a landowner representative.

Many LAFs reported that they were disappointed that the funding for the Regional Coordinators has been cut due to budget restraints. Natural England is not in a position to resume funding for Regional Coordinators but we will continue to support LAFs in other ways. LAFs and the Appointing

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Authorities report that they value support from Natural England and we will continue with national support and some form of local support for LAFs as set out in the LAF Engagement Plan on Huddle.

Natural England provides national support for LAFs in three ways, Huddle, the newsletter and the national conference:

- Although Huddle (the online information and discussion forum) is valued by some LAF members we understand that others believe that Huddle is not available to all: Natural England will continue to promote that Huddle is still available free to all LAF members. In 2015 we polled LAF Huddle members about using Facebook (or other social media platforms) as an alternative to Huddle but this was not seen as an appropriate medium so we will not be moving to Facebook. In 2016/17 in consultation with Huddle members, Natural England will work to improve the Huddle workspace and LAF toolkit. Next year Natural England will also be more specific in survey questions regarding how Huddle helps LAFs to be more effective.
- LAFs report that they value the LAF newsletter and Natural England will continue to produce it regularly and seek stronger feedback on the newsletter. Natural England will also continue to raise awareness of relevant consultations for LAFs via the newsletter and Huddle using the new consultation whiteboard which is updated regularly.
- Feedback also suggests that a national LAF conference each year is invaluable to LAFs and their partners and Natural England will continue if possible to organise a national conference each year with talks and workshops.

LAF Engagement with other bodies (LNPs, LEPS, LAGs, HWWBs) is still very limited and Natural England will do more to help LAFs engage with these bodies by promoting their work via the newsletter, contacting the bodies directly to promote LAFs and we will share good practice examples via the national conference, newsletter and Huddle.

Finally we will continue to improve the annual reporting process following suggestions from LAFs to allow spell checking in the Annual Review Form and we will include more clarity on what is required in the consultations/advice section. As stated before we will also add questions to the annual survey to find out the factors that contribute to LAFs effectiveness so that we can share this information and continue to improve our support to LAFs, thereby helping them to deliver more for their local people.