

National LAF Report - April 2013 to March 2014

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Foreword by Natural England

I am delighted to introduce Natural England's third annual report to Defra on the work that Local Access Forums achieved during the year ending 31st March 2014. Once again there are many examples of how LAFs are advising their appointing authorities, and other bodies with responsibility for public access, on improving the opportunities for outdoor recreation whilst taking into account the needs of land management and nature conservation.

In selecting activities to add to this national annual report we sought examples where LAFs demonstrated how they had made a difference to the access provided in practical ways. The report below summarises many of these examples such as identifying specific places where the Public Rights of Way network could be improved for walkers, cyclists and horse-riders as well as for those with limited mobility. One LAF had directly influenced the removal of stiles and gates where not required for land management and one had managed a grant scheme to support improvements to the network. Others had supported funding bids such as the Heritage Lottery Fund and Natural England's Paths for Communities scheme. Some LAFs have monitored the standard of maintenance of routes and one had developed a volunteering programme to help look after local paths.

LAFs have also contributed to a wide range of public consultations seeking to reduce impacts on existing public access whilst maximising improvements. They have raised awareness of disability needs, opened dialogue with landowners and sought to increase land manager representation on LAFs, and they have brought together diverse views to seek solutions to issues such as vehicular use of Public Rights of Way and the behaviour of dog owners and their pets.

Many LAFs have begun to consider the ten year review of their Rights of Way Improvement Plan and have advised their local authority on future priorities. Some have sought to link with other local networks such as Health and Wellbeing Boards and Local Enterprise Partnerships to demonstrate the importance of good public access to health and to tourism. All important if LAFs are to be effective at showing the relevance of public access to the issues that are high on local agendas. Success has varied and where progress has been made we encourage LAFs to share this so that other LAFs may benefit from the experience.

This annual report combines the headlines from the LAF annual reports along with results from the annual survey of LAF Chairs and Secretaries. The survey informs Natural England and Defra on the type of support LAFs seek and influences the way that we provide that support. Many of the themes and issues emerging from the LAF survey and cited in this annual report will be the topics of discussion in the regular LAF Newsletter, on Huddle and at the annual conference to be held in 2015.

This report will be used to raise the awareness of the LAF collective contribution to public access and comes with great appreciation for the voluntary contribution that individual members make. The report will be used to raise the profile of this contribution with Ministers, government departments, local authorities, and all organisations involved in the delivery of public access to the natural environment.

Wendy Thompson
Natural England Principal Adviser, Access and Engagement
October 2014

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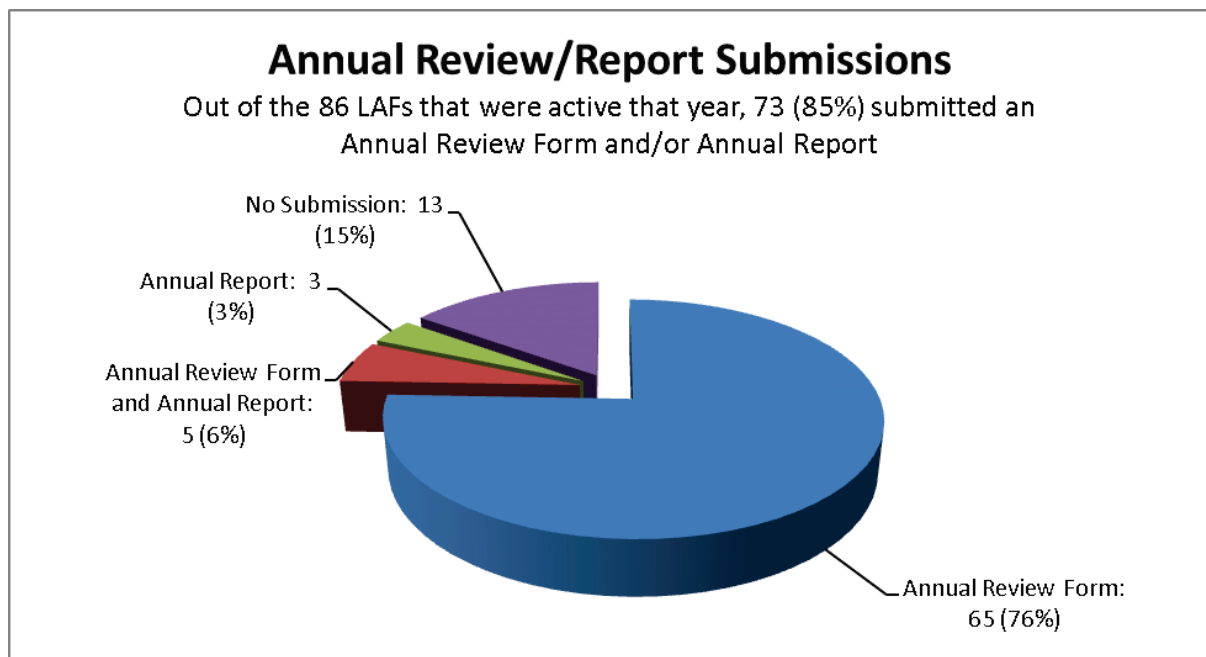
1. Introduction

Natural England has responsibilities 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 2013 to March 2014. 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 to Natural England, by the 30th June 2014. The LAF Regional Coordinators produced summary reports for their region which have also been used to inform this report. In addition we conducted an online survey between 13th March and 4th April 2014 amongst LAF Chairs and Secretaries. The results have also been fed into this report. All of the charts in this report are prepared from data submitted on the Annual Review Form or to the Annual Survey.

Last year's report was published in February 2014. For this report we have brought the publication date to October 2014 and our thanks go to the LAFs and Regional Coordinators for bringing their respective submissions forward to enable us to produce a more timely report.

The final submission results are as follows:

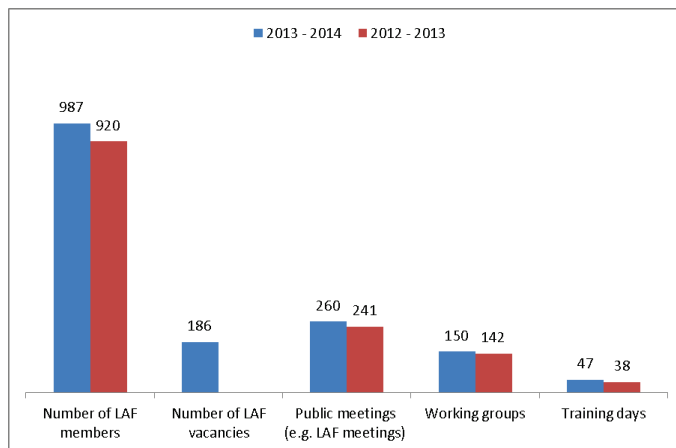


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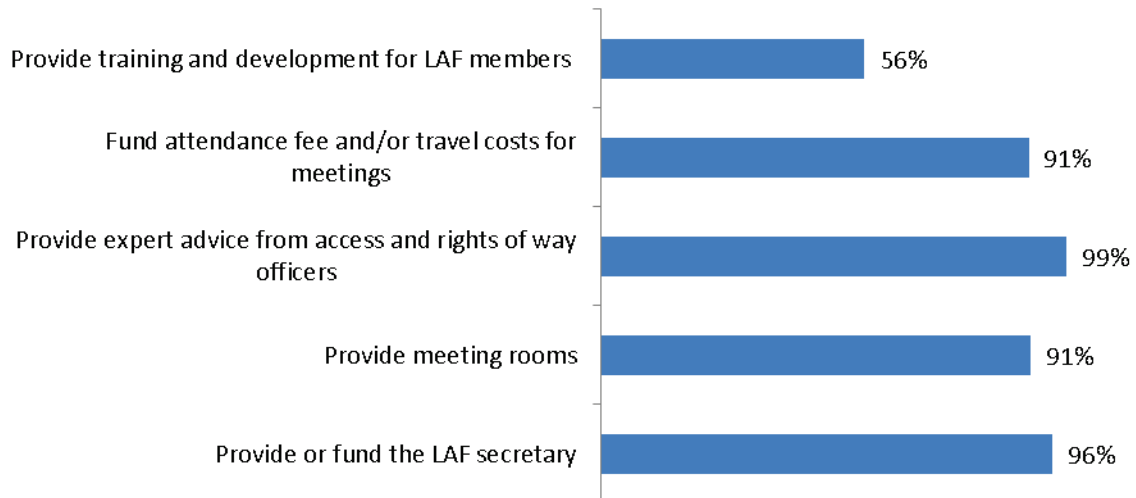
2. How LAFs operate

Over the last 12 months most LAFs (59%) retained the same number of members; 17% had increased and 23% had decreased.

Most LAFs (57%) met more than 3 times a year and only 14% met less than twice during the previous year, 94% of meetings had more than half of their members attending.



In general LAFs received good support from their appointing authority but notably a small minority are not employing a secretary, or funding member expenses, contrary to the legislation that established LAFs and supporting regulations (The Local Access Forums (England) Regulations 2007).



Over half of LAFs (57%) operated sub groups, who met at variable intervals throughout the year. These groups covered a wide range of topics from practical matters relating to routes and open spaces, partnership working to develop new approaches as well as the preparation of plans and strategies. Sub-groups reported back to their LAF in a variety of different ways.

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3. LAF achievements

3.1 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. More details about the achievements of the LAFs are available from the 2013 – 2014 Regional Reports on the LAF Huddle workspace.

Bury LAF held its first meeting on 11th September 2013 and began by setting out the four priority issues for members:

1. Misuse of the countryside by off road vehicles;
2. The condition of the Public Rights of Way Network;
3. The lack of implementation of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan with particular regard to bridleways;
4. The protection of open spaces from proposed development, including wind turbines and wind farms.

During the first three meetings there was much discussion relating to these issues and other topics including:

- The Definitive Map and Statement - The LAF expressed a desire for the Authority's definitive rights of way records to be reviewed and updated. The last review was carried out by Greater Manchester Council in 1984.
- Identification of horse riding routes around Ainsworth and Elton Reservoir. - Some members had researched the demand for horse riding routes in the west of the borough and suggested possible routes.
- Greenmount Village Hiking Group proposal to create a West Pennine Moors Way, including a link to the Pennine Way. Members of the group offered support and advice as to how best to take this forward.
- The creation of a circular walk linking the rural communities in the north of the borough. Almost all of the work on this "Village Link" has been the responsibility of one of the LAF members through her role in the Bury Rural Inequalities Forum. The LAF provided and support and advice to this initiative.

Central Bedfordshire and Luton JLAF worked closely with Central Bedfordshire Council Officers on the review of the Outdoor Access Improvement Plan (OAIP). Following adoption of the plan, the LAFs focus moved to agreeing the annual action plan and monitoring progress against the agreed actions at six monthly intervals. The LAF also provided support for a Paths for Communities project to create a new cycle path to the West of Biggleswade and provided input to the proposed level crossing closures on the East Coast Main Line.

Cheshire East LAF members used their local knowledge to advise on five major road schemes that all had implications for non-motorised users, and required comment from the LAF. The LAF contributed to the pre-submission consultation on the local authority's Core Strategy, emphasising (among other points) the importance of access and rights of way to tourism and the rural economy, and the LAF's views were incorporated into the finished version. The LAF was also active in surveying routes for Cheshire East's booklet "Walks for All 2" and emphasised walks which can be reached without a car, and which are located on urban fringes.

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Cumbria LAF advised Natural England on the roll-out of the England Coast Path and attended the opening of the first stretch in Cumbria in April 2014 (Allonby to Whitehaven – 35km). The Cumbria LAF (along with the Lake District National Park LAF) has also been involved in several meetings and discussions with Natural England on the proposals for the second stretch between Whitehaven and Silecroft (55km) which were published in October 2014. Both LAFs provided local advice and information on specific access challenges on the proposed route. More recently, the Cumbria LAF provided information on existing access opportunities and issues on the third stretch of coast, where work began in September 2014.

Natural England staff reported that Cumbria LAF were particularly keen to get involved in the planning of Coastal Access. They welcomed regular briefings from Natural England at their meetings, and were proactive in providing advice and support.

Devon Countryside Access Forum's Chairman initiated a meeting with the local authority lead on the Local Nature Partnership and the Head of Health Improvement for South and West Devon. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss shared objectives and the development of a Naturally Healthy Task and Finish Group. This group was set up and included representatives from a number of organisations and further information on its outputs will be available for the 2014-15 annual report. The Devon Local Nature Partnership launched its 5 year prospectus early in 2014. Being naturally healthy is one of the seven priority themes underpinning the three aims to:

1. Protect and improve Devon's natural environment
2. Grow Devon's green economy
3. Reconnect Devon's people with nature.

Dudley LAF developed and launched a volunteering programme in conjunction with Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council Countryside Service. Volunteering focussed mainly on the Coombeswood Green Wedge site that the LAF had been very interested in for the last few years. The programme was beneficial in getting members of the LAF out working with local Friends groups to help maintain some important parts of the path network in the borough. It has allowed members to have greater variety in terms of their involvement beyond just attending meetings.

The LAF also provided training for local authority staff and members on the Equalities Act, 2010 and how this applies to public access. The Equalities courses were run by Access in Dudley which is the organisation headed up by the current LAF chair, Tina Boothroyd. It was an opportunity to educate Council Officers and LAF members regarding disability awareness issues in the outdoors and utilised a nature reserve site (Wren's Nest). The site had recently benefitted from investment through the Heritage lottery Fund so parts of the site had been upgraded specifically to improve disabled access whilst other parts remain inaccessible to some people with special access requirements owing to the topography of the site. The LAF advised that the site provided a good test case to show what improvements can be made to support accessibility at natural sites (not just steps and gradients but also raising awareness about other issues such as colour contrasts, vegetation management and textures.).

East Riding of Yorkshire and Kingston upon Hull Joint LAF. Members of the JLAF worked with East Riding of Yorkshire Council and other organisations such as GLASS (representing the protection of Green Lanes) and LARA (representing responsible motorised recreation) to help with the development of a Policy for the Management of Unmetalled Highways and Byways Open to All Traffic (BOATs). The Policy which has now been formally adopted by the East Riding of Yorkshire Council shows how positive engagement between the Council, the JLAF, and in particular GLASS and

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LARA has led to a workable and sustainable way forward for these valuable countryside assets, and for everyone that uses "green lanes" for access and recreation.

Two farming JLAF members were actively involved in promoting the ideas of positive access and have opened up dialogue between landowners for the benefit of all who use the countryside for access and recreation. Drawing on their keen interest in conservation as well as their extensive farming and land management knowledge, an article was published, and well received, in the national Country Land and Business Association Magazine. This was an excellent way of promoting the role of LAFs to the land-owning community.

East Sussex LAF provided advice on the management of public vehicle access along Byways Open to All Traffic (BOATs). This involved making recommendations regarding seasonal traffic regulation orders and input into a 'byway user' leaflet. The Forum provided guidance regarding two contentious path diversions (to Network Rail and Southern Water respectively). The LAF also reviewed and investigated specific ROWIP aims and provided advice to the Access Authority on priorities. The LAF provided advice to Natural England and Defra regarding decadal reviews of open access land as there is a specific issue about missing detail in the Sussex area.

Essex LAF had significant input into Essex highway authority proposal to close byways and to their proposed hierarchy for Public Rights of Way maintenance due to budget reductions, with proposals being amended in response to LAF comments. Essex Highways proposed a blanket closure of all byways in Braintree District from October to April with no consultation and the LAF wrote a comprehensive letter formally objecting. Now only 5 Byways across the County are subject to a temporary closure order from November to March

Exmoor LAF is helping to monitor delivery of the Exmoor National Park Partnership Plan 2012-17. In particular, the LAF has strategic responsibility for Priority B2 of the Partnership Plan: *Maintain high quality rights of way, services and facilities to enable people to explore and experience the special qualities of the National Park.*

JLAF (Joint Local Access Forum for Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol City and South Gloucestershire) continued to work with the Ramblers Association to finance and staff a team of volunteers to maintain rights of way. The JLAF also participated in a working group to develop the Walkers Are Welcome initiative in the area. The respective local authorities feel that the JLAF have made a positive contribution to outdoor access in the area and can see a great deal of potential with the Walkers Are Welcome schemes being established by local communities in partnership with the JLAF.

Leicestershire LAF created a sub group to investigate the opportunities to create new Public Rights of Way to improve the existing network. The sub group examined plans of farmland due for tenancy renewal during the following year, and formulated recommendations to discuss with the County Council Operational Real Estate Manager. The outcome of these discussions included the dedication of a public footpath, joint investigation into a route suitable for people with disabilities and families with pushchairs and highlighted other routes that may be useful that could be negotiated prior to other tenancies being renewed.

Mid-Lincolnshire LAF and South Lincolnshire & Rutland LAF created a sub-group to investigate how to provide more opportunities for disabled people to enjoy the countryside. The sub group:

- Invited, listened to and has worked with a range of disability groups to identify issues which created barriers to accessing the countryside;

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- Jointly with the disability groups, agreed that the Countryside For All format previously used by Lincolnshire County Council provided the best solution;
- Received training from Lincolnshire County Council in creating route information;
- Audited and surveyed individual routes;
- Assisted Lincolnshire and Rutland County Council in the design of the route literature.

Four route leaflets have been produced to download from the council website or pick up from centres. The number of routes will grow annually bringing benefits to people with disabilities as well as young families with pushchairs and others who wish to enjoy the countryside.

Oxfordshire Countryside Access Forum focused on advising Oxfordshire County Council on preparing their second ROWIP (called the Rights of Way Management Plan), including examining national and local user research, understanding the use and demands on the network, and considering the management and maintenance by the County Council and others. A workshop enabled LAF members to scrutinise and contribute to the emerging ROWIP2 prior to the 12 week statutory consultation in January. Members highlighted the need to provide better access for people with disabilities and more provision for cyclists. The LAF also considered the responses to the consultation and the changes proposed in response before the ROWIP was adopted. Members praised highway authority officers for the production of a very comprehensive response and actions document which showed how each comment was considered by the authority and how the final ROWIP2 would change as a result. Once ROWIP2 is adopted LAF members will be fully involved in working with the authority to prepare their bi-annual rights of way business/delivery plan.

Peak District LAF attended a cycling summit, which was an opportunity to meet with individuals across the National Park and its environs to agree on priorities for a co-ordinated system of cycle routes for the wider Peak District. To assist with the development of the funding bid for this substantial project, the Peak District LAF contacted the 6 LAFs in the surrounding areas to ask them to offer their support. All the LAFs sent letters supporting the approach and fundraising bid. The partnership bid was successful and work is now taking place on the key link routes and a funding scheme for cycle hubs.

The LAF had been calling for a Cycling Strategy for the Peak District for some time. The above project means that the strategy has now been developed and approved by the National Park Authority. The LAF pressed for the inclusion of mountain biking within the strategy, and this advice is in the action plan. The LAF will be represented on the resulting mountain-biking focus group.

The LAF members also contributed to Derbyshire County Council's Countryside Service Volunteer Policy which was developed during the year. The Council sought advice from both this LAF and the Derby & Derbyshire LAF at their meetings. Both responded with specific suggestions and much of the advice has appeared in the policy published on the County Council's website.

The LAF responded to consultations on potential traffic regulation orders on routes in the National Park. The LAF has also been working with officers of the National Park Authority and Highway Authorities over a number of years to identify actions to improve the management of Green Lanes in the National Park, and to advise on the implementation of these actions.

Rotherham LAF prepared a paper aimed at encouraging farmers and landowners to become LAF members and have recruited additional members including landowners and disability access representatives. They also had meetings with MPs, Area Assembly councillors, and senior managers in key related organisations to encourage greater awareness of the LAF's role. The LAF allocated £15,000 to improve Public Rights of Way and agreed a priority weighting matrix to advise the access

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authority on its approach to the review of its Definitive Map. They advised the authority on a number of access improvement proposals in country parks and woodlands including extensions to existing multi-user trails.

South Downs LAF was instrumental in shaping some key behaviour change messages for dog walkers in a farmed landscape and is now acting as a 'critical friend' on the South Downs Way National Trail Partnership. During the year the LAF tackled significant local rights of way issues including diversion of a footpath proposed by Network Rail and improvements to access along a missing section of otherwise accessible coast. The LAF also supported and advised on improvements to a dangerous road crossing on the Downs Link and on a new multi-user path linking Brighton with the National Park.

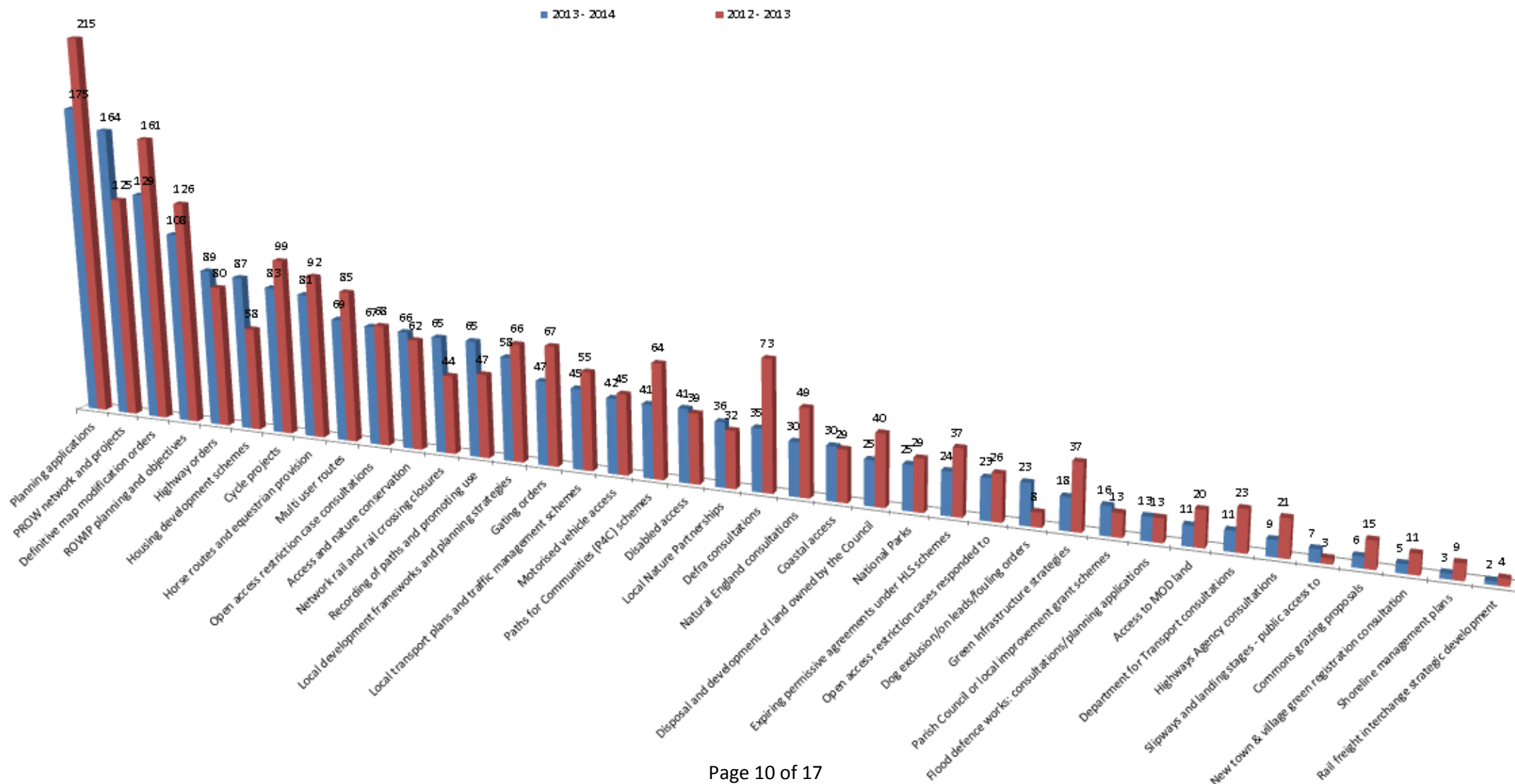
Wiltshire and Swindon Countryside Access Forum continued to provide financial support to practical, 'grassroots' access improvements through the annual Paths Improvement Grant Scheme (PIGS) operated in conjunction with Wiltshire Council. Match funding was provided to nine PIGS projects across the county ranging from surface and furniture improvements to permissive routes to link up the rights of way network. Through the scheme, forum representatives were able to offer advice on how individual projects might be improved and developed to add further value to the network. The PIGS scheme will run again this year and has already attracted a number of strong applications from Parish Councils. The scheme is attracting other sources of community funding to invest in the Public Rights of Way network.

One PIGS initiative is to replace stiles with gates on a substantial scale throughout the Southern Area district. To date 60 kissing gates have been installed

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3.2 Consultations and partnerships (comparing 2014 and 2013)

NB The chart and statistics below were produced using the data provided by the 82% of LAFs who submitted Annual Review Forms and shows the large number and variety of LAF activity during the year.



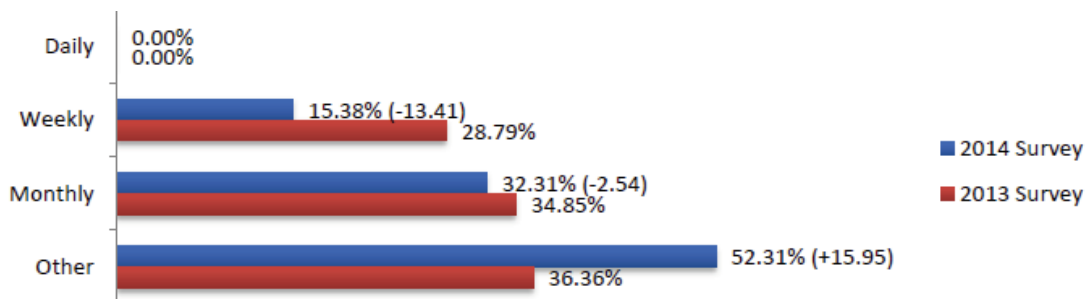
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4. LAF communications and events

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. Throughout the year the number of LAF members using Huddle increased to 280 (244 reported last year) with 98% (95% last year) of LAFs represented. On average each LAF had 3 representatives using the LAF Huddle workspace.

Most respondents rated Huddle's ease of use as being very good to satisfactory (72%) although there was a 10% movement down from very good to very poor. LAF Chairs and Secretaries reported that they mainly accessed Huddle monthly (32%) with 15% checking the site weekly and 52% less than monthly or never.



Most (42%) feed information from Huddle to their LAF at meetings. There was a 16% drop from last year's results in confidence to join in on Huddle discussions and also a 13% drop in confidence to upload files or amend whiteboards. However, the individual sections on Huddle were mostly rated very good to satisfactory.

During 2013 Natural England provided guidance and information on Huddle covering a series of topics. The aim was to update the guidance currently in the LAF Handbook and to prompt discussion about examples of good practice. These Best Practice Guides were mostly rated very good to satisfactory (79%). In response to feedback from the annual survey Natural England will produce the guides as PDF documents, as well as content on Huddle, for email circulation to non-Huddle LAF members.

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

4.2 LAF conference

Natural England organised a national LAF conference for 2014. In order to keep travel costs to a minimum, two conferences were arranged in Bristol and Durham on 4th February 2014 and 7th March 2014 respectively. Three quarters of LAFs were represented with 111 delegates in total attending both conferences.

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The conference programme was based on topics suggested by LAF members, with a range of speakers and workshop facilitators from the LAFs, Defra, Natural England and other organisations with an interest in public access. The presentations included:

- an update from Defra on the Deregulation Bill and how this is likely to impact on the recording of Public Rights of Way.
- briefings from two of the main lottery funding bodies, providing information on how LAFs can access lottery grants.
- presentations by National Rail on rail crossings, the Ramblers, the CLA and the NFU.
- workshops on Local Enterprise Partnerships, dogs in the countryside, access for all and LAF effectiveness.

The lively discussions within workshops and informally in the margins of the conferences, along with positive feedback from delegates, clearly demonstrated that the events were worthwhile and appreciated. Feedback from those attending revealed that whilst 100% said the content met with their objectives, overall satisfaction with the organisation and logistics was slightly lower than the previous year. One local authority commented that the conference was extremely valuable to LAF members adding, "We value the publication of the national conference proceedings, and the national report on Local Access Forums prepared by Natural England, as these help to keep secretaries/appointing authorities in the wider picture."

Materials from the conference, including workshop notes and feedback from delegates, are available to download from the LAF Huddle Workspace and the LAF page on gov.uk.

4.3 LAF Newsletter

During 2012/13 Natural England produced a new quarterly newsletter (LAF News) and issued three editions. This was in response to feedback received from LAFs that they would value more regular direct communication from Natural England. The newsletters included articles on Paths for Communities, Local Enterprise Partnerships, information from the conferences, examples of LAF good practice and details about Natural England staff whose work involves LAFs.

5. Engagement with other bodies

LAFs have been encouraged 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 and efforts have continued beyond that reported in this report. Results from the LAF survey showed that roughly half (51%) of the survey respondents reported that their LAF had written to their LNP with 43% reporting a follow-up meeting and only 5% stating that they had worked on a joint project with an LNP. Just 13% reported that their LAF had had written communication or a meeting with a LEADER LAG and only 5% reported any joint working with them.

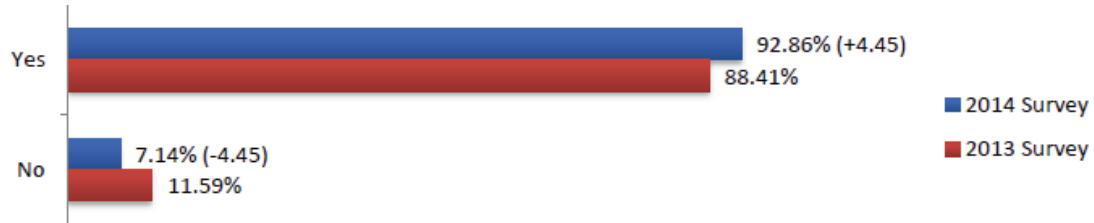
Written communication with LEPs was reported to be higher (17%) than with LEADER groups though only 5% reported any meetings and only 2% reported joint working with LEPs.

Roughly a quarter (27%) of LAFs had engaged with Health and Wellbeing boards through written communication, 20% reported meetings and 12% reported joint working.

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6. Links with Natural England

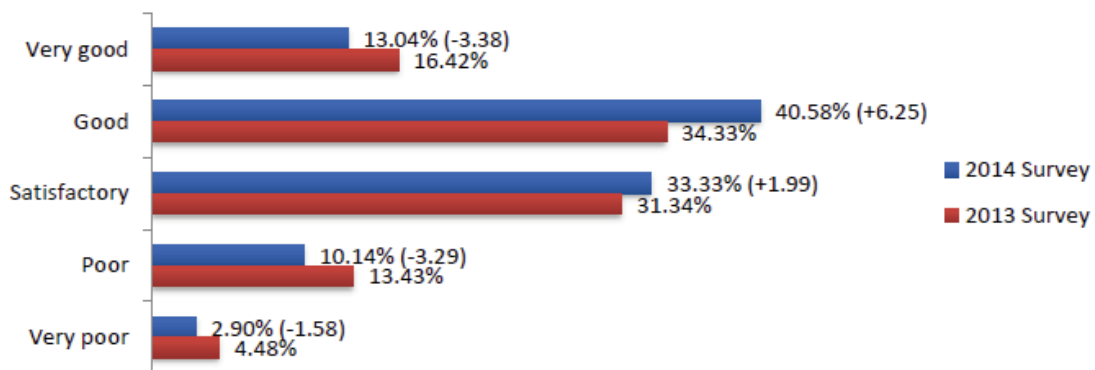
The vast majority of the LAF survey respondents reported that they knew their local Natural England contact (93% - an increase of 4% from last year's survey)



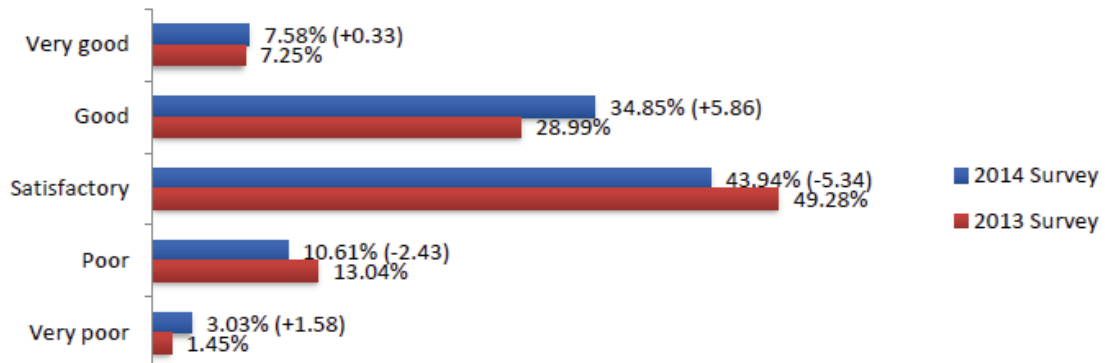
and just over half of respondents (54%) were satisfied with the ease of access to Natural England with 8% dissatisfied.

The majority of respondents said that both the local and national support they received from Natural England was very good to satisfactory (87%/86% respectively):

Local Support



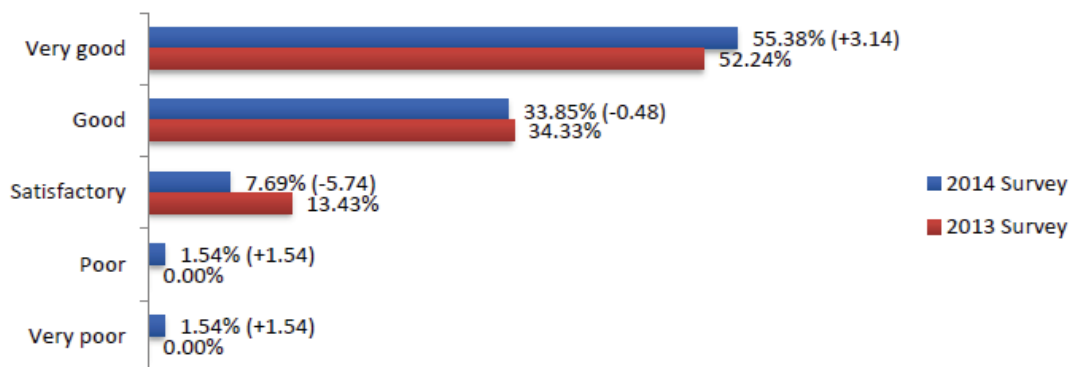
National Support



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 similar to last year's survey with the vast majority (97%) saying that the support they received was very good to satisfactory.

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A suggestion to improve the regional support for LAFs was that the Regional Coordinators organise LAF Secretaries meetings in addition to regional Chairs meetings and conferences.

7. Advice and guidance

The majority of LAF Chairs and Secretaries were aware of the Defra guidance (97%, up 12% on last year's survey results) and use it (89%, up 19%). Most (59%) reported that they feel it doesn't need to be revised but a significant 41% say it does need to be revised to reflect:

- How sub-groups operate;
- How members vote;
- More clarity on budgets and on the level of support from local authorities;
- Changes in policy and legislation.

The majority (88%) know of the LAF handbook, though down 6% from last year's survey results and most (57%) use it.

The number of LAFs receiving training by their local authority remains low at 40% which is similar to the previous year's survey results. The training was rated mainly good to satisfactory. The results also show that most appointing authorities (78%) paid for a LAF member to attend the national LAF conference. The majority (76%) responded to say that Natural England should organise more face to face training for LAFs with most (81%) suggesting that the Regional Coordinators could run it if appropriate. The type of training required ranged from details on Public Rights of Way legislation and the List of Streets, to lots of suggestions for training in running an effective LAF, recruiting members and working with Councillors.

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 95% of respondents to the LAF survey and most (78%) saw the benefit in using the Annual Review Form, an 18% increase from last year. Most (91%) 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 Review Form in consultation with the Regional Coordinators and the LAFs.

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9. Issues and challenges identified by LAFs

The Annual Review Form provided LAFs with an opportunity to list some of the challenges they have faced over the year along with their suggestions and ideas to help with these in the future.

The challenges faced included:

- Problems in recruiting, being quorate and retaining sufficient members and members that represent a diverse range of interests. Some LAFs had addressed this by raising the profile of their work and running recruitment campaigns to attract new members;
- Reduced local authority resources leading to fewer meetings and reduced administrative support;
- Reduced budgets for the local authority to undertake rights of way duties and inability to act on advice provided by LAFs;
- Lack of understanding and awareness of the role of LAFs with the Appointing Authority, planners and generally;
- Difficulties in responding to planning consultations due to lack of notification and insufficient time for LAFs to respond;
- Consultation formats increasingly do not allow for collective sharing of initial responses prior to sending;
- Lack of clarity about terms of reference and meeting protocol;
- Poor attendance from local authority staff, elected members and LAF members;
- Difficulties creating and developing successful partnerships (e.g. with Local Enterprise Partnerships/Local Nature Partnerships/Health and Wellbeing Boards);
- Working practices restricted by those adopted by democratic/committee services which reduce the flexibility of LAFs to operate in a more independent manner;
- The complexity of the P4C application process resulting in limited take up in some areas;
- Geographic size of the area has led to discussions by email, and those issues not included on formal agenda;
- Meeting times insufficient in order to achieve the work programme.

Opportunities and suggestions included:

- More guidance and evidence from central government on the inherent value of access to well-being, would strengthen the arguments to support public access and the role of LAFs;
- More visible support from Natural England to help reinforce the role of LAFs on Health Boards would be welcome;

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- Request that Natural England monitor consultations and ensure questionnaires are in a format that would allow sharing of drafts prior to submission from a LAF.

Natural England and Defra 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 to LAFs at the 2014 LAF conferences. Natural England is also supporting LAFs to share good practice through Huddle and at regular meetings and events.

10. Appointing authority feedback

Despite the many issues and challenges faced by the LAFs over the year, particularly regarding frustration due to diminishing local authority resources, many of the LAF appointing authorities had positive comments to make about their work.

Many local authorities acknowledged the commitment of LAF members despite ongoing staff changes and budget reductions in many appointing authorities. There was high praise for the work of the LAFs and the commitment and passion of the members. Their continued support, time and effort was valued.

Several authorities welcomed the clear, independent and considered advice received by LAFs with some recognising that this work is something the authority would be unable to do itself. Having an independent viewpoint on access proved to be of great assistance, particularly when dealing with developers. A number of excellent enhancements had resulted from the LAFs working with developers and officers.

The experience and advice given by forums was highly valued along with the enthusiasm and determination to deliver results and secure achievements. LAFs were a welcome consultee, especially on ROWIPs and other strategies which could deliver or impact on access. The LAF was described by one authority as an “invaluable critical friend”. Another authority said LAF’s worked well as a team and were not afraid to challenge authority.

Some authorities commented on the skills, knowledge and diplomacy within LAFs to successfully resolve local issues. The dedicated, constructive way the LAFs tackled important themes or topics was noted along with the initiative many LAFs took to put forward suggestions and to organise their own pro-active work programmes. One authority specifically commended the LAF involvement with the Local Nature Partnership and with health issues.

In addition some authorities noted that many LAF members had increased their involvement in Public Rights of Way work outside of meetings including volunteer days and organising meetings with their user groups on specific issues to develop and support the Public Rights of Way team. One authority added that the benefits and cost savings being achieved by LAFs continue to play an important role in service delivery.

The Appointing Authorities also noted some challenges and difficulties in working with LAFs and in particular the difficulties in combining the various views present into clear and coherent advice.

Feedback from the Appointing Authorities included ideas and suggestions for actions that could help develop and improve LAFs and the work they do. They noted the importance of continuing to raise

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the profile of LAFs at all levels and with a wide range of organisations. Many of the suggestions focused on streamlining and prioritising work areas to reduce agenda size and the volume of meeting papers, as well as ordering the business dealt with at the meetings so that important matters were dealt with first. One authority suggested that it would be useful for the secretaries of LAFs to network to help develop the effectiveness of the LAFs.