

National LAF Annual Report - April 2011 to March 2012

Foreword by Natural England

This is Natural England's annual report to Defra on the work that Local Access Forums achieved during the year ending 31 March 2012. We have collated together a selection of notable achievements from the individual annual reports, as well as some of the issues raised. Together they provide an interesting overview of the range of work that LAFs are involved with as well as some challenges they face. This report will be passed to the Minister so that he is aware of the good work LAFs are doing.

LAFs provide a local level body of expertise on matters relating to public access and outdoor recreation. They are a great example of localism in action. By bringing together volunteers from a range of backgrounds and interests, the LAFs demonstrate relevance to local decisions relating to a range of social, economic and environmental issues. The work of LAFs to encourage improvement to greenspace, other open access and connecting routes is important in helping to enable a healthier population, contributes to quality of life, creates opportunities for children to learn more about the natural world around them and contributes to local economic growth by attracting visitors to explore the landscapes, wildlife and heritage in an area. The best and most sustainable achievements involve working in partnership across sectors and in the coming year we look to LAFs to develop relationships with Local Enterprise Partnerships, Local Nature Partnerships and Health and Wellbeing Boards. There are many examples where this is beginning to happen and where the respective groups are finding common purpose.

There is certainly a wealth of expertise within LAFs to share with other bodies but also plenty to share with other LAFs. The conference at the end of February 2013 facilitated the exchange of knowledge and we, in Natural England, want to build on that momentum to support LAFs to continue to share good practice whether through contributions to a newsletter, by adding material to a new section on Huddle or through circulating ideas at the LAF Regional Chair meetings.

I look forward to hearing more about the good work in the year ahead.



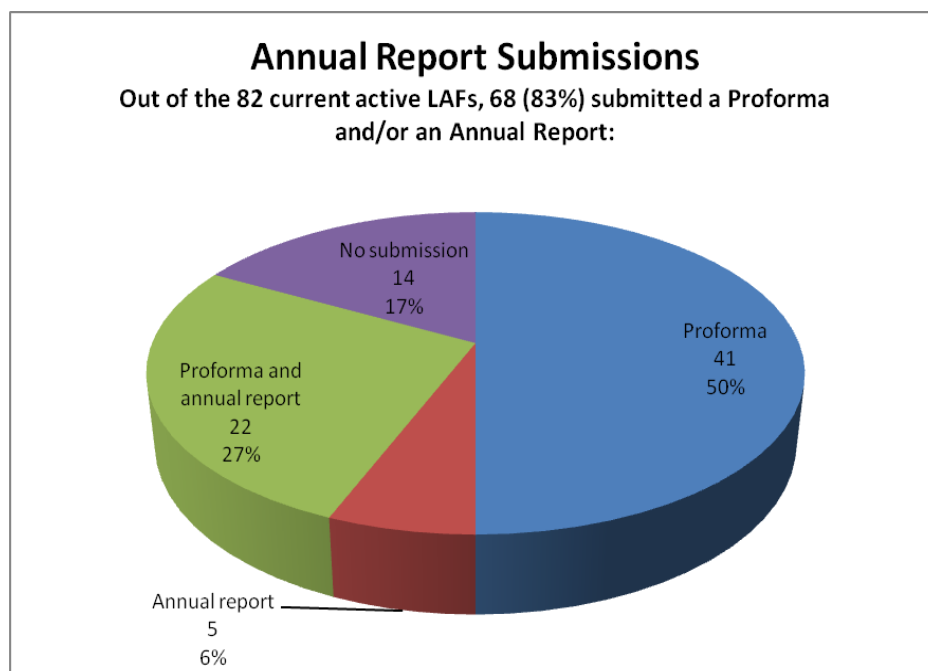
Liz Newton
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1. Introduction

Natural England has responsibilities set out in the CROW Act (section 19 of the 2007 regulations) to receive annual reports from all LAFs. This report summarises all of the LAF annual reports received covering the period April 2011 to March 2012. The report provides statistics on LAFs and the activities they have undertaken, highlights some of the achievements reported, identifies issues and makes recommendations on improvements that could be made.

A revised reporting period was introduced to allow LAFs time to compile their annual reports. The reporting year end is 31st March with the submission deadline of 31 October. The LAF Regional Coordinators produced summary reports for their region which have been used to inform this report. ¹

The LAFs were asked to submit an annual report to Natural England ideally using a proforma provided. The final submission results are as follows:



2. Examples and details of some individual LAF achievements

LAFs have engaged in and influenced a wide range of consultation processes which are summarised in section 3.

A detailed selection of LAF good practice that has helped to achieve access benefits for local communities is set out below:

Cumbria LAF - Worked closely with partners from Natural England to make sure the Coastal Access Path worked well. They reported that a positive model for working

¹ Reports from Regional Coordinators have been placed on Huddle

together had been developed which will make developing further stages of the coast path much easier.

Lancashire LAF - Work started on the Pennine Bridleway before the LAF existed but in recent years the LAF had been actively involved in its creation and development. The LAF reported that the experience of involvement with stage 1 allowed them to be more proactive on alignment of stage 2 of the National Trail.

Rotherham LAF - The rights of way team allocated £20,000 of the annual budget to the Local Access Forum to spend on countryside access improvements including: installing/fixing kissing gates, waymarkers, fingerposts, vegetation clearance and resurfacing.

Buckinghamshire, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire LAFs have been significant consultees with regard to the HS2 railway. Through meeting representatives from HS2, the LAFs have secured assurances of a better deal for access and rights of way along the line. Mark Bailey, Deputy Head of Environment for HS2 and his Team said he had been very impressed by the engagement, feedback, local knowledge and debate from Warwickshire Local Access Forum in respect of managing access and rights of way issues in the run up to HS2's Environmental Impact Assessment.

Cambridgeshire LAF - LAF members worked with the Wildlife Trust to assess disabled access to the Greater Fen Project, to highlight any access risks and develop a plan for future improvements, including improvements to the building and the removal of gradients too steep for wheelchair access.

Hampshire Countryside Access Forum (HCAF) - In 2010 the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded the Hampshire Countryside Access Forum (HCAF) £46,600 for the Providing Access to Hampshire's Heritage (PATHH) project. The New Forest National Park Authority provided an additional £5,000. A Project Officer was employed to take the project forward, overseen by a Steering Committee led by HCAF members. The project was completed by the end of 2012, and succeeded in gathering research by over 100 volunteers for routes with strong historical evidence, but which also meet a modern need, as identified in the Countryside Access Plans. The project delivered workshops in 13 schools (29 classes, 820 children), an exhibition at 24 venues, and over 17 talks to interest groups.

HCAF has continued to monitor the Hampshire Countryside Access Plan (CAP) delivery and members are present on each of the CAP working groups. Working group progress reports were received at a number of HCAF meetings, and the Forum provided advice on best practice for the running of the groups. The HCAF has also contributed to project work, led by the Area Countryside Access Managers. This included a workshop to develop key messages to feature on a leaflet to promote the responsible use of byways. This is part of an initiative with the Community Safety Team.

Swindon Countryside Access Forum (SCAF) – The SCAF has worked on developing a local statistical evidence base, using data largely derived from MENE analysis. This concept has been modelled on the Wiltshire 'Joint Strategic

Assessment' initiative which aims to produce "a single version of the truth" upon which policy decisions can be made. The SCAF consider that for its advice to be influential it must adhere to the same quantitative rigour that the local authority adopts towards its other decision making processes. Initial analysis has focused on benchmarking Public Health Outcomes Framework indicator 1.16 and the level of people walking generally throughout Wiltshire and Swindon. The aim of this first study is to provide evidence to support the transfer of funding from the Health budget to pay for infrastructure improvements in the rights of way network, particularly targeted in areas of highest health inequality.

JLAF (Bristol, Bath & North East Somerset and South Glos) – JLAF has worked with local authorities on the Outdoors West programme, to develop and publish a website at www.OutdoorsWest.org.uk as a first stop for information on the outdoors in the area. This is designed to be an attractive approachable website with mapping and information that people want, with the main aim to increase use of public rights of way. The website also holds background information and advice on public rights of way, access to mapping of furniture (stiles, gates, signs) on routes, and a system to allow online reporting of problems on the path network.

A JLAF working group has advised on the website content and approach, particularly helping to compile a routes database which has involved surveying routes, writing directions and plotting maps. This section of the website is still under construction, but will be a valuable database of attractive, reliable routes for people to explore the area. Other organisations such as the Cotswold AONB, National Trust, Health Walks and Museums are also involved in providing routes for the website.

The JLAF has extended the Cotswolds AONB Voluntary Warden service across the whole of the JLAF area. With start-up funding from Natural England, volunteer teams have been established to carry out on-site tasks such as vegetation clearance, kissing gate installation, as well as step and surface repair and installation.

3. Common consultations and activities that LAFs have been involved with over the year

Local Consultations	National Consultations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highway Orders • Green Infrastructure Strategies • Planning applications • Gating orders • Local Transport Plans and traffic management schemes • PROW network and projects • Forestry Panel, the proposed boundary review of the Yorkshire Dales NP and the Lake District NP • Definitive map modification orders • ROWIP planning and objectives • Connect 2 and other cycle projects • Disabled access • Core Strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Coastal Access Trail - involved in the development of the (NW) • National Park Partnership Plans • National Planning Policy Framework consultation • Public Forest Estate consultations • Independent Panel on Forestry • Commons grazing proposals • The Natural Choice – The Natural Environment White Paper • Ministerial letter to Local Access Forums – responses • Defra’s key discussion document ‘An Invitation to Shape the Nature of

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dog exclusion, dogs on leads, dog fouling orders • Housing development schemes • Local Nature Partnerships • Recording of paths and promoting use • Flood defence works - Environment Agency consultations and planning applications regarding • Local development frameworks and planning strategies • Expiring permissive agreements under Higher Level Stewardship schemes - assessing the value and future of and liaison with landowners to improve access • Multi-use design criteria (Devon CAF) • Improvement of access through the PIGS scheme (Parish Improvement Grant Scheme) • Slipways and landing stages - public access to • Higher access rights to publicly owned land and the disposal and development of land owned by the Council. • Parish Council or local improvement grant schemes • Olympic mountain biking venue at Hadleigh - ELAF responded to Essex County Council's consultation • Shoreline Management Plans - ELAF to Environment Agency's - Essex and Suffolk Shoreline Management Plan • Rail Freight Interchange Strategic development • Network Rail and Rail Crossing Closures • Access and nature conservation • The definitive map and dedication of Land and Routes. • Horse routes and equestrian provision • Multi user routes - Balancing provision for • National Parks – Peak LAF have strong presence in all Park matters • Coastal Access / South West Coast Path • Access activities: walking, horse riding, cycling, running, paragliding, climbing, fishing; outdoor pursuits; conservation activities; wildlife watching; farming and land management, motorised vehicular access; Community transport; activities for guides and scouts; rural small 	<p>England'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Big Conversation public consultation about savings needed as a result of the government's Comprehensive Spending Review
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<p>business; coastal access; urban access; access for all and more</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motorised vehicle access • Access to MOD Land • New Town & Village Green Registration government consultation • Moving Inland Waterways into a Charity in England and Wales' by Defra • National Planning Policy Framework - Advice to Government on the draft • Simplifying Traffic Orders consultations - Comments to the Government • Highways Agency consultations • Revisions to the Countryside Code 	
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4. National Achievements

4.1 Huddle: internet based network to share information

To help enable LAFs countrywide to work together and share good practice, **and to facilitate communication with Natural England and Defra**, a LAF workspace was set up on the Defra Huddle website. This was trialled with the eight LAF Regional Coordinators, then rolled out gradually to LAF members. Initially this was to one 'Huddle Champion' per LAF which was expanded to three per LAF by March 2012.

- Number of LAFs represented on Huddle by March 2012 = **63 (76%)**
- Number of LAF members on Huddle by March 2012 = **121**

4.2 LAF conferences

In 2011/12, two national conferences were organised by Natural England in Newcastle and Bristol with speakers from Defra/Natural England, workshops and a video address from Richard Benyon to the LAFs. LAF representation was:

- Total LAFs represented = **73 (89%)**
- Total LAF member attendees = **79**

4.3 LAF annual work programmes

LAFs are encouraged to prepare annual work programmes and most reported that they were successful in meeting the objectives they had set themselves although in some instances work did not progress as swiftly as initially desired. A list of the typical work areas covered by most LAFs can be found in section 3. These mostly involved providing advice on:

- national consultations such as the National Planning Policy Framework or the Independent Panel on Forestry; or
- local consultations such as planning applications, RoWIPs or highway orders;
- Access restriction cases from Natural England.

5. Issues Identified by LAFs

It is important to remember that whilst LAFs are advisory bodies established under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, they are run by volunteers. The current economic climate affects both the LAFs and the public sector that supports and works with them resulting in some frustrations and concerns. The proforma provided to LAFs for their annual reporting included sections for LAFs to list some of the issues they faced over the year along with their suggestions and ideas that could possibly help with some of these in the future.

Issues Raised by LAFs	NE/ Defra Response
Local authority funding cuts and restructuring have resulted in reduced staff time to support LAFs in holding regular meetings and in officers being less familiar with LAFs and the role they need to play.	Publication of 'Engagement Plan' that sets out respective roles and responsibilities
Pressure on budgets to improve and maintain access.	Promote 'good practice' sharing via Huddle and Newsletter. Continue to promote P4C via LAF networks as possible source of funding.
Section 94 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act lists the bodies that must have regard to relevant advice provided by a LAF. However there is a lack of awareness about this obligation amongst some of the bodies listed.	NE will circulate new newsletter to S94 bodies and remind them of the need to consult with LAFs.
General lack of awareness of LAFs and their activity at local and national levels.	NE will produce and circulate the Annual Report and a quarterly Newsletter. NE to set up 'good practice' sites on huddle across a range of issues.
Frustration in consulting on matters within the defined statutory time period and coinciding with LAF meetings.	LAFs to share good practice (are there lessons to be learned from other voluntary groups?). Consider other ways to communicate between meetings.
The highway authority backlog of Legal Event Orders is frustrating for LAFs who provide advice and then often see no progress for some time.	The package of recommendations of the Stakeholder Working Group will streamline the process and allow the definitive map cut off date to be commenced. Local communities should hold local authorities to account for their spending decisions and priorities.
Many Forums struggle to engage with certain sections of society, in particular young people and black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. A couple of forums also mention inability to attract candidates from disabled user groups and/or individuals. One LAF is struggling with representation from land management / farmers and one would like to see some local business interest too.	LAFs to share good practice on engaging with communities and encouraging new volunteers to join the forum.

Issues Raised by LAFs	NE/ Defra Response
Lack of time to look at Huddle for complex consultations	Share Good practice such as requesting the LAF Secretary summarise issues on Huddle at meetings.
For those LAFs with wide geographical areas, the distances involved in travelling to meetings can be a barrier for members attending meetings, especially in the winter months when the weather can be inclement. Meetings too can be lengthy with too many Agenda items.	Chairs and secretaries to note the need to seek ways of making it easier for members to attend meetings (rotating location perhaps) and to ensure agendas are managed effectively. Local authorities to consider training and development where required.
LAFs would value some training on MENE and on the use of ecosystems services valuations.	Natural England conference presentation on Huddle and NE web site. RCs are encouraged to lead on helping LAFs with specific enquiries. NE is developing a toolkit to help individuals to use MENE which RCs will be briefed on.
Request for briefing from Defra on the implications of the “localism” agenda for LAFs.	The Localism Act was introduced in November 2011 and devolved more decision making powers to individuals, communities and councils. LAFs are an example of localism in action.
Continued support for national training and specifically on equal access to the countryside and dedicated work under the new Equality Act.	Natural England is currently surveying LAF Chairs and Secretaries for their views on LAF’s national training needs and will consider how these can be met through a combination of briefings, guidance, bespoke training and events. Local authorities are required to provide reasonable training for LAF members.
LAFs need more regular communication from Natural England both through feedback from this annual reporting process, in replying to correspondence and through feedback from LAF consultations.	Natural England is producing an annual report to Defra/Minister and will circulate this to all LAF members via the Chairs and Secretaries. Natural England provides a summary of the results of all consultations on its web site and will ensure LAFs are aware of this. Natural England has a Customer Service Standard to acknowledge all correspondence within 10 working days and to provide a full response within an appropriate time scale.
Concern re the impact of changes to HLS and those with agreed permissive routes on sites.	Natural England will brief LAFs on changes to agri-environment funding that impact on public access to the natural environment.
Open Access Restrictions – changes in staff structures at Natural England meant that a local person was no longer able to go along to meetings to explain issues. Natural England is now offering teleconferencing as well as information by email, however joining in is not considered easy by LAF members as they are not confident with the technology or familiar with the process for the meetings.	Natural England staff that deal with open access restrictions cover large areas of the country. It will continue to be necessary to provide information by teleconference or email. Teleconference would be to a LAF meeting and the Secretary will be encouraged to make this facility available.