

National LAF Conferences 2013 – 14

Workshop: LAF effectiveness: raising profiles and recruiting members

Bristol Conference:
Andrew Poole, Leicestershire County Council

Durham Conference:
Bob Anderson, Cheshire East LAF

Speaker's Summary – Bristol Conference

A workshop on LAF effectiveness about raising profiles and recruiting members was led by Andrew Poole of Leicestershire County Council. The presentation outlined LCC's active promotion of the Leicestershire Local Access Forum and the successful recruitment campaign in 2011-2. Forum promotion has included leaflets, posters and banners, plus a well-attended day conference for stakeholders, and innovative formats for the Annual Report. The Forum has also produced two combined press releases & briefing documents, publicising key issues with which user groups, parish councils and local communities were encouraged to get involved.

The recruitment campaign was needed to refill 5 places on the Forum. A detailed applicants pack was widely circulated, and backed-up by a well-targeted press release. In total LCC had 15 suitable applicants, as well as various enquiries and some good local media coverage about the Forum. The success of the campaign was helped by packaging it as a serious volunteer role, making it clear what was expected of Forum members. Publicity highlighted the benefits for individuals of being a Forum member. Hard work compiling distribution lists, mostly using email or other existing channels, meant the publicity was spread widely whilst printing and postage costs were limited. The Leicestershire documents are all available via Huddle and other councils are welcome to re-use these.

The workshop highlighted good practice by other appointing authorities. Having identified their gaps in the coverage of interest areas Birmingham City Council, had good results from making direct approaches to relevant organisations, e.g. persuading the Canal & River Trust provide someone to represent waterways. Discussion highlighted a range of other issues related to recruiting and supporting Forum members. For example, the appropriate times for meetings and the challenge of covering some interest areas varied somewhat between smaller unitary authorities and the larger rural shire councils. An added challenge is the limited support from some authorities, leading to declining morale amongst some Forums. However, the Bristol conference also showed the strong commitment of the many Forum members who participated.

I found participation in the whole day very interesting. There was a good range of presentations and sessions and I both learned something and had my pre-conceptions about the CLA somewhat challenged.

Andrew Poole
Leicestershire County Council

Summary – Durham Conference

The prompt for the 'Raising the Profile of LAFs' theme was the realisation that apparently most, if not almost all, LAF members have never heard of LAFs until they see an advertisement asking people to apply. There is very little awareness out there of the existence of LAFs, let alone what they are for and what they do. A show-of-hands indicated that virtually all of the 20-30 people present, like Bob, had never heard of a LAF before applying – which went some way towards answering the first of the four questions Bob used to frame the workshop discussion: **Why? With whom? How? Who?** Cheshire East LAF was fortunate in having a new member who, as an ex-journalist, was able to use her skills to help raise the profile of this new LAF.

Delegates, encouraged to participate fully throughout, contributed the following.

Why?

- The work of LAFs touches everyone and needs to be known across society.
- If we believe access is important, we can only show this by raising our profile.
- Maybe we need to clarify what we do. Are we moving from an advisory to a more active role?
- What is the role of the LAF? When LAFs were established originally, they had a very clear role. Does the LAF role need to be clarified and perhaps revised / developed; and maybe move from a purely advisory role to a more active one?
- The profile needs to be raised so that the LAF is known; otherwise it will not get members or the help needed.
- It is necessary to establish LAFs' status as a statutory body with appointing authorities – not just another pressure group (as sometimes seen).
- Profile of the message we give – highlight the importance of Rights of Way and Access. If we concentrate on that, will it be easier to raise the profile of the LAF and what it is about? Unless you have a concrete issue and one that is of interest to the public and the media the message will not be heard.
- Raising a LAF's profile is of great value in recruiting members – few have achieved the desirable state of having to choose from a range of candidates.

With Whom?

- Public generally
- Appointing authorities, not least because they hold the purse strings
- Cabinet / elected members and senior management (e.g. CEO) – only four delegates said their LAFs had regular contact with higher officers
- Planning authorities
- Borough councils – they don't know the LAF exists or consult them, and often don't consult the Highway Authority
- Parish councils – attend parish council meetings (some LAFs have had major drives to engage with them)
- Section 94 bodies
- Landowners and landowning groups

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- Ramblers, Sustrans, BHS etc i.e. interest groups
- U3A walking groups – many around and need to engage with these groups
- Network Rail
- Need to identify gaps – people and organisations – proactively to fill LAF vacancies

How?

- Through local media: press and radio
- Local authorities' own publications
- Websites – most rely on council websites; two LAFs had set up their own, being dissatisfied with their council's website; this was much preferred, though problems of managing/updating were acknowledged. Websites need to be informative.
- Go direct! Contact/telephone/write to/meet local councils and user groups – personal contact has more impact.
- Recruitment: letter to governing body (though one LAF wrote to 10 bodies and received not one response).
- Officers need to actively look for missing representation.
- Rotherham LAF have prepared a PowerPoint to give a presentation on what the LAF is and does to give to local parish councils and user groups, health boards etc and this does work!
- Introduction and overview of what PRoW are – to get public understanding of what LAFs are and what they are about, but starting at the top with Authority Members.
- Posters in local nature reserves, parks and other suitable sites, brings responses.
- Self-guided walk leaflets and using walk launches
- Yorkshire Dales is very good at getting hard-to-reach groups involved, engaging different groups in the access discussion, and has broadened 'Access for All'.
- The LAF can play the role of 'honest broker' and can have a mediation role, making positive interventions to bring about a compromise solution. This can raise the LAF's profile locally and save the local authority time and money, and avoid a public inquiry.

Who?

- Is a national strategy needed e.g. national media, then regional and then local?
- To raise profile nationally and at a regional level would be the role of NE, but accepted this is not within NE's remit.
- Great regret at absence of national organisation/meeting/voice for LAFs; this used to exist, but not anymore. Would be appropriate national lead.
- Some agreement that LAFs can only raise profile locally, though action is needed nationally.
- Richard Benyon's letter was thought to be condescending.
- The only way to get a national profile is with face to face meetings.
- Huddle is NOT the answer – emails are easier than Huddle.
- Locally LAFs have influence and can work at local level.
- In view of 'Localism', perhaps there should be a more regional approach rather than national and this is perhaps already working.
- LAFs do have a regional structure. Should the approach be to begin with this as a base to build a national profile – working upwards from the bottom rather than downwards from the top (through chairs / regional meetings etc)?

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Question and Answers – Bristol Conference

Q: Did you stage events or open evenings to recruit new members?

A: No, we invited candidates to meetings to get a feel for what we discuss and who else is present.

Q: How much has it cost the local authority in print costs and did you target people from specific organisations?

A: We had very little budget for printing and in fact kept this to a minimum. The majority of flyers were sent via email and documents were available to download. We did target interest from specific groups, but didn't get positive results. We had more success when casting the net wider. They had a good response from parish councils.

Q: Does your LAF have their own website address and how many hits do you get in any specific period? Do joint LAFs have any funding?

A: There is no dedicated website for the LAF, but a page can be accessed via the county council's website. The LAF do have their own email address, but Andrew didn't know how many hits the page gets. Joint LAFs don't have a budget, but the LAF has secretarial time provided by the local authority. Budgets are an issue; some local authorities won't or can't tell LAFs what budgets they have been allocated. Forum members can help by compiling mailing lists for targeted promotion.

Q: They have observed less support at each meeting from their LA, they feel this is demoralising forum members. If they leave how will the LA maintain this statutory function?

A: The main thing is to add value to LA work and promote this widely. The LAF have been heavily involved in providing access advice regarding HS2. The LA has appreciated this and in turn this has boosted the profile of the LAF.

Q: It was suggested that a cross section of members is required to enable the LAF to work effectively. Is there a quota required from the differing sectors?

A: No quota is prescribed by Defra on membership from each sector; however it's important to try to get a cross-section of representation. In Birmingham they found it difficult to attract members on countryside issues and access can be misconstrued to mean disability. They have targeted specific organisations such as The Canal and Rivers Trust, the Police and Friends of the Earth by appealing to the organisations' ideals rather than the LAFs need. He's had the best results by phoning organisations direct.

Q: There is no one selection method being used by LAFs, should there be?

A: No, each LAF will find what works for them, but don't be disheartened - if one approach doesn't work try another. Look on Huddle see what others have done. Make the process simple. Get a time commitment from candidates, outline the number of meetings they are expected to attend and that more is required may be required than simply attending meetings.

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Q: They have a wide range of members in their LAF, but can't seem to attract cyclists, this made more difficult by the wide range of cycle groups i.e. some are commuters, mountain bikers or racers; any suggestions?

A: Try CTC, although lots of cyclist don't belong to any organisation, put flyers in the local cycle shops.

Q: How can we attract young people?

A: Target people who work *with* young people rather than the young people themselves, e.g. D of E, universities and colleges. Experience shows young people don't stay long in LAFs, but they may return in later life. It's possible to highlight the benefits to them with the enhancement to their CV in volunteering for a statutory body. Offer the young person a specific job that other members can't do such as developing a website or a Facebook page.

Observation: When the LAF started in 2003 it was a result of the CROW Act 2000. At that time the LAF had a waiting list of members. It's apparent that a 'cause' can raise public interest and thereby bring in members whilst raising the profile of LAFs. They keep a list of interested parties and draw on these when membership wanes.

Observation: Have found it's very important to have landowners or farmers as they have so much experience and knowledge and are able to provide perspective to debates.