

Research notes

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Local Access Forums:

a review

Summary

England's 81 LAFs vary greatly in their characteristics and in how they function. In most cases there is an initial enthusiasm for public service and motivation among members. However, sometimes this lessens, partly because of uncertainty about LAFs' role, and also owing to concerns about communication levels and integration within other departments and processes of the AA (appointing authority). Some LAFs are struggling to meet the statutory minimum number of members and/or keep a balanced representation of interests (particularly land management) following resignations. However, this is the minority picture with most meeting on average four times annually, and discussing issues such as PROW (public rights of way), open access land, ROWIPs (rights of way improvement plans), and Government consultation papers.

Background

LAFs were introduced by s94 and s95 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000, their main function being to advise their appointing authority (AA) "as to the improvement of public access to land in that area for the purposes of open-air recreation and the enjoyment of the area". By 2004, anecdotal evidence, (eg in the form of feed-back from forum members at various events) indicated widespread uncertainty about their role, and concern about the limited extent of liaison and communication. Additionally, Defra had received reports of LAFs in one or two areas struggling and the risk of key LAF members losing interest, and even resigning.

Accordingly, early in 2005, the Countryside Agency commissioned the Countryside and Community Research Unit (CCRU), University of Gloucestershire, to provide:

- information on the structure, geographical extent, and activities of England's 81 LAFs;
- a definition of what could be widely recognised as a 'successful' LAF;
- the factors that contribute to this and, conversely, an assessment of the barriers to success;

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- a review of matters affecting their work, now and in the future;
- an assessment of whether LAFs require additional support and guidance, and if so how, (and from whom), this could be best delivered;
- recommendations on further action required at national, regional and local level.

The overall aim was to determine how the Agency, Defra, the Local Government Association and others can better support the work of LAFs, and help to develop their role.

Methods

In summary, these were:

- A desk study of the material available on each LAF, reviewing existing annual reports and other literature produced by LAFs;
- A questionnaire survey to obtain the views of LAF members and secretaries, and AA officers;
- Case study interviews in 16 varying situations; and
- An assessment of the future needs associated with LAFs

Findings

(i) Characteristics and membership of LAFs

The number of members sitting on LAFs ranged from 5 to 22. There were three cases of LAFs with fewer than the statutory minimum of 10 members.

Type of LAF ¹	No.	No Data	% Return Rate	Ave No. members	Land No. (%)	Users No. (%)	Others No. (%)
Joint	13	1	92	19.4	5.6 (29)	11 (57)	14 (72)
National Park	9	1	89	17.2	5.2 (30)	9.4 (55)	14 (81)
County	26	0	100	17.1	5.5 (32)	9.5 (56)	12.2 (71)
Urban	34*	7	79	14.7	3.6 (24)	7.4 (50)	7.8 (53)

*this includes 6 Joint LAFs made up of Metropolitan or Unitary Authorities representing urban areas

(ii) Views of members, secretaries, and officers

LAF members appear to represent a broad range of interests and were largely recruited through local advertising or were 'head-hunted' by the AA or a particular organisation. They typically spend between 2-5 hours a month on LAF work outside of meetings and attend at least 3 out of 4 meetings a year. They consider that their own contribution is quite useful to the LAF. Those in urban LAFs felt slightly less useful with fewer representations and motivations and spend less time on LAF matters outside of meetings.

The respondents to the surveys of members, secretaries and officers see the relationship between the LAF and the AA as strong. Only in urban LAFs does this seem to be questioned, largely in terms of the support offered by the AA to the LAF. The level of resource offered by the AA was not considered sufficient in any type of LAF, except those in national parks.

The membership appears to be about right for most involved with LAFs, as is the geographical area and the involvement of the public. The skills balance is the factor mostly likely to concern officers. There are LAFs with polarised views, arising from some interest groups, but in only a few (mostly county LAFs) are these dominant.

It is clear that members, rather than officers, were more likely to consider LAFs to be effective. There remains a question about how people judged

1. For an explanation of what is meant by each type, see Paragraph 4.12 of the main report

their own contribution whether this was to issues being debated within the LAF meetings, thus influencing what was agreed; or whether this influence was manifest in terms of action or changes beyond the meeting (e.g. by the authority changing its methods of operating).

(iii) Administration and organisation

It is clear from the case studies that for some authorities, simply getting the LAF established was an achievement. Although established for nearly two years, in most cases, LAFs have not yet had an opportunity to make a significant impact on development of access and outdoor recreation in their areas. Where there has been some impact, this is most likely to be because the LAF and AA are 'in union' and working together towards an accepted common aim.

Many were disappointed by the opportunity to comment on the draft maps as they felt there was little they could comment on and were doubtful about the impact it would have. In other LAFs where there was little access land to comment on, the purpose of the LAFs was questioned.

However, the case studies show that there is a fount of goodwill – LAF members are keen to be involved as shown in the motivations – but this goodwill is not unconditional and will decline over time unless LAFs achieve positive outcomes. This is not being helped by AAs appearing to have struggled in some areas to incorporate LAFs into their existing structures. This needs to be resolved before the LAF members and officers become too disillusioned. This trend seems to be greatest in 'urban LAFs'. It is possible that this is a result of the perceived connection (in some minds) between LAFs and open access land. Thus if the area covered by the LAF does not have any access land, its purpose is reduced, as indicated in the perception of all those surveyed – that support by AAs is lowest among urban LAFs.

In terms of the smooth running of LAFs, it is clear that the roles of Secretary and Chair are critical. The arrangements within the AAs for the duties of a secretary appear to revolve around two options. The first is where the duties are added to an existing member of staff or compose all or part of the duties of a new post. In both of these cases the secretary is part of the broader Rights of Way department. The second option concerns the use of the AA's committee structure so the more formal arrangements for secretarial support are used, but with no expertise in the LAF subject matter. Such diversity among the secretarial arrangements is not necessarily bad, provided that the LAF is 'fit for purpose'. Many of the LAFs also indicated that the Chair has a key role to play in the smooth running of the LAF. Yet many did not place particular attention on the selection of the Chair or in supporting them.

(iv) Areas of uncertainty

There is evidence of some uncertainty over the role that LAFs are meant to fulfil, especially amongst LAF members and also, but to a lesser extent, amongst LAF secretaries and AA officers. This lack of clarity has a knock-on impact on the effectiveness of LAFs. Areas of uncertainty relate to:

- The AA's obligations to listen to LAFs;
- The breadth of issues that can be covered by LAFs;
- The remit with respect to site-specific matters;
- Determining what issues are important (in the context of there being too many issues to address).

(v) 'Successful' LAFs

It is possible to summarise that successful LAFs tend to:

- Have more time for informal discussion and networking (e.g. a two

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way information process with informal elements equating to 'training' sessions);

- Organise site visits to examine particular issues;
- Spend time beforehand preparing material on particular items;
- Have good secretary/chair communication both before and between meetings;
- Have a specific slot for the relevant AA officer(s) to report back on items raised at previous meetings;
- Invite a range of outside speakers to make presentations to the LAF;
- Set up sub-groups to investigate specific issues, eg RoWIP, a major local road scheme.

Conclusions

Time, stability, reflection and readjustment will be needed for a 'LAF culture and tradition' to develop. This is especially significant where 'unnatural' alliances have formed where several authorities (typically unitary) have combined to form a LAF and yet share little common cultural ground. For example in these instances a number of RoWIPs need to be considered, perhaps reducing the amount of input the LAFs have to this sphere. However, where new (often unitary) authorities have combined with old more established authorities, a productive and stable relationship has been created. Without any culture or tradition, many LAFs are unaware of their potential to influence their AA and others interested in access and recreation in their areas.

The better functioning LAFs appear to be more assertive than their less well-functioning peers. In asserting themselves, LAFs:

- Set their own agenda and develop a work plan;
- Agree targets and objectives, leading to a sense of achievement amongst members and officers when these targets are met;
- Influence and advise upon the AA's budget allocations.

Despite not receiving large amounts of training, LAF members are generally not looking for further training and there are mixed views of the need for support in the form of websites, with some in favour, others less so. However, there was clear consensus in favour of Defra/Agency (and other national stakeholders) assisting with:

- Producing a LAF Member Induction Pack;
- A national or regional annual conference for members, secretaries and officers (either together or separately);
- Issuing guidance to clarify the role of LAFs (maybe in the form of examples of good practice – i.e. where LAFs have made a difference);
- Profile-raising amongst the public and decision makers in local government.

There is unlikely to be a single correct way to run a LAF. Their purpose is to mould their activities to local circumstances, and these will inevitably vary.

Further reading

Countryside Agency (2005).
Review of Local Access Forums.
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