

Chairman's Report
Mid-Lincolnshire Local Access Forum
3 July 2012

LAFs were created as advisory bodies, composed of volunteers who are expected to attend only a handful of meetings a year. Following spending cuts, the government, largely through Natural England, appears to have looked at LAFs with a view to them, in some way, filling gaps in local authority management resulting from those cuts. I find this worrying, because there is nothing about the way they are constituted, resourced or staffed that either allows them to expand their role.

However, a benefit that has come from this is that LAFs are being encouraged to work together across regions and nationally, and to be in close contact with Natural England. The creation of a LAF space on the Huddle online communication system by Natural England is part of this, and although the financial support for regional LAF co-ordinators is to be withdrawn, it has been kept on for a transitional period with the intention that, partly via Huddle, LAFs will be able to continue to operate at a regional level. I can see benefits and opportunities in this for LAFs objectives, but I'm not sure they are the same one's NE see, or the government sees. In particular, I fear that their expectations might be unrealistic and based on imagining a pool of free voluntary labour exists through LAFs, when it does not.

If LAFs are expected to operate in the way Natural England hopes, in the future, I think the appointing authorities need to take this into account when appointing new members, and we need to work together in a different way. If we have to do more work we will need to delegate to sub-groups, and that means members able to lead those groups, and for there to be achievable timetables for work which can be met. In saying this I know that the authorities have difficulty recruiting members now. So, the way forward in the end might turn out to be telling the government to be more realistic about what it hopes to get from LAFs.

I attended the Natural England conference for LAFs earlier in the year and much of what I have said here is based on my impressions gained there. I've also regularly attended meetings of East Midlands Regional LAF chairs, and find these very useful. It is particularly important to know where there are common problems across LAFs and shared views on the solutions, and equally where not. There are wide differences in the way different LAFs work with their authorities. Some are used by their authorities in something of a scrutiny role. Some are actively engaged in individual path problems and decisions, while other authorities keep the LAFs at arms length and use them only for strategic advice.

Turning to our work in hand over the last year there are several points I want to make :

There has been some confusion about annual reporting of LAFs. Natural England has produced a *pro-forma* for what I think might be better termed an "annual return" rather than a report. We are required to make this return, which will help NE to monitor LAF activity and influence nationally. We are still free to make our own reports in whatever way we want. Locally, this has been something written mainly by officers, and mainly by Lincolnshire County Council officers. I feel that the local authorities should feel free to make their own reports - within their own reporting systems - on how they feel their LAFs are performing, how useful they are etc.. But that if a report is made in our own name, it might be better if it was independently written by us. But this again depends on our ability to organise ourselves to do it.

The Paths for Communities project is now open to applications. We will be discussing this at the July meeting, but I want to record my concern that projects like this come

before LAFs only at a very late stage. If Natural England wants LAFs to perform their proper role, it must understand that advisory bodies cannot to their job if they are not involved at the earliest stages of a project. I know that in this case, NE was greatly constrained in what it could do, because the funding comes from a European Union budget with very strict spending criteria, nevertheless, if consultation is worth doing at all, it is best done as early as possible.

No one will be surprised to hear me say I remain disappointed at the slow pace of progress on definitive map orders by Lincolnshire County Council. I feel sceptical of the will of the Department for Farming and Rural Affairs to see DMMO work progress. It could do more with both carrots and sticks to encourage authorities to speed up this work. So, I look forward with a critical eye to its latest consultation on the way forward under the CRoW act implementations. In the past, Defra, or its predecessors have a record of doing what they wanted in the first place when consultations do not agree with them. In the meantime, I believe there is much that could be done by using existing financial resources more efficiently in this work.

As one of the LAF Huddle "champions", I have been feeling my way around the system and taking part in some online discussions through it. I feel there's a tendency for some discussions to be dominated by people all leaning one way on a controversial issue, which is perhaps inevitable, those who disagree feeling that this is a discussion where they are not welcome. But we will need to be careful not to mistake an agreement reached on a Huddle discussion group as a wider agreement amongst LAFs, or LAF members. I thought this because of one or two discussions appearing to regard increasing "higher level" provision by upgrading footpaths to bridleways and bridleways to BOATs is as an automatic good. We must not lose sight of the value of footpaths as routes people can walk along in relaxation, without nuisance from "higher" users. There are people out there arguing that all footpaths should be open to cyclists, and complaining that only 6% of the rights of way network is open to motor vehicles. To me these are nonsensical ideas that are totally contrary to the spirit of quiet enjoyment of the countryside.

This brings me to the Wold Trail, whose opening I am looking forward to hearing about, as I was not able to attend it myself. This is a higher rights route as it should be, using almost entirely existing vehicular routes, but seeking out safe and tranquil ones. We need to build on the concept of quiet roads by making roads quiet, calming traffic, reducing car speeds etc.. We need to reverse the trend for even the quietest country road becoming unusable by all but irresponsible car drivers, for motor users driving away the tranquillity of even green lanes, and for increasing demand for higher right non-motor routes to mean fewer pure bridleways and footpaths. That's a personal view of course.