

Some Notes on the Working of the JLAF for BaNES, City of Bristol and South Gloucestershire

Notes for the meeting on 2nd March 2007

1a) Why?

The cancellation of the formal meeting on 2 March 2007 has given us the opportunity to review the operation of the JLAF by way of an informal meeting.

1b) These notes

The notes below are not a comprehensive critique of the past or my personal blue-print for the future. They are a collection of ideas that may help to facilitate a discussion on where we are and what we may want to do in the future. To keep them immediate and local I have not researched what we have done and have deliberately not read the proposed new guidelines on the operation of Local Access Forums.

1c) Why bother? – accountability

Apart from filling a vacant date on the calendar what is the value of such introspection? We must be one of the cheaper local government quangos but we do take up people's time. So we cannot take our continued existence for granted. Apart from that, many members will want to know that they are achieving something and whether we are working in an effective way.

2) Where are we now? – an audit?

The first step to accountability is to find out where we are now. I suggest we need an audit of what access we currently have. This means a review of our access assets both material ones (like parks, open countryside etc) and organised initiatives (like walking for health, walking buses etc).

3) Advantages to be gained from an audit

- 1) Council departments would be encouraged to talk to each other more readily and thus projects would have a better chance of funding and successful implementation.
- 2) Publicity could be organised. One aim should be a comprehensive web-site of outdoor opportunities with links to other providers.
- 3) We would know when something has been added to our access capital

4) An audit – how?

We should not underestimate the complexity of council structures and the difficulty of getting meaningful information from them. This requires either a commitment from the Councils or failing that do we have JLAF members with the skills (i.e. knowledge of the working of councils) to get started ourselves? Or see RoWIPs below.

5) Funding

An alternative method of measuring success might be by monitoring funding. We have had one go at this already asking the Rights of Way Departments to give us their budgets. The results were far from encouraging because of a number of complexities. We could either set up a small working party to try to tease some sense out of the figures or we could identify (ideally in co-

operation with the Councils) a small number of critical areas of expenditure for which budgetary information would be routinely supplied.

6) RoWIPs and other priorities

We should develop a list of things we would like to see done. One way into this might be the recommendations that we hope will surface in the RoWIPs. We should press for the appointment of a RoWIP Officer who, amongst other things would develop priorities. The creation of such a position would mean that the Councils are taking RoWIPs seriously.

7) Access in the widest sense

Inevitably we bring our own special interests to the JLAF but perhaps we should step back a bit and aim at creating a culture of access for a much wider range of the community. My logic is that there is likely to be more support for projects that help the less able, parents and carers with young children etc. Funding would follow and the creation of a more active community would lead over time to satisfying the needs of more narrow interests like walkers and equestrians. Do we have sufficient representation on the JLAF of the disabled etc?

8) Developing relations with other bodies

We have excellent relationships with the Unitary Authorities but very little contact with other bodies. This could mean identifying those groups that share our aims, keeping them informed and hoping that they would feed into our efforts.

9) Parish councils

Parish councils are a potential source of funding for access; they can be the eyes and ears of the access movement; they can be a driver for local involvement; they have means to communicate with their communities. We should investigate how we can help to inspire them. In the event that some Councils because of their make-up are less enthusiastic than others we could identify individual Councillors to work through. I have a theory that dog walkers are the storm troopers of the access movement. Can we encourage them to work for improvements through parish councils?

10) Rights of Way Liaison Groups

I think that the JLAF is right not to get involved in the detail of Liaison Group activity. To do so would undermine them. However we are showing support by our officers attending their meetings and we should monitor the success of the Councils in maintaining our rights of way in line with their statutory responsibilities.

11) Commitment of Councillors and officials

The commitment of Council officials has been excellent. The commitment of Councillors has been patchy! If we had Councillor members who were genuinely interested in access rather than seeing it as just another demand for funding that they must resist it could make a huge difference to our influence on events. Is there a way of influencing the appointment of councillors to the JLAF?

12) JLAF structures

We have been successful in dealing with the two major issues that have confronted us so far – a working party was set up to advise and monitor access to open countryside and registered common land and more recently we have contributed in a really meaningful way towards the study of parishes feeding into the RoWIP consultation. At our last meeting we appointed a Deputy to the Chair and Vice-Chair and in my view this three-headed approach is working well. If members think that any of the above points are worth pursuing then we will have to consider how to organise ourselves for the future.

13) A Vision

Don't you just hate those meaningless statements? Perhaps, though, discussion of the above points will produce some sort of waymark for the future.

Some other issues that members might wish to comment on.

Knowledge of members

When we started members brought their own expertise but arguably some were light on the function of the JLAF and some were hazy about rights of way legislation. Our last chairman produced papers on these issues. My impression is that we mostly know what we are doing now!

Role of the Secretary

We have been extraordinarily lucky in having a dedicated Secretary who brings the commitment that Chris Hogg does to the job. There is no indication that this arrangement is under threat but we must ensure that this remains the position.

Finding consensus

We had a rather philosophical discussion about the meaning of consensus. However, in practice it has not been hard to achieve with our current positive membership. Are we happy that everyone's voice is being heard? On consultation documents we have included a minority view. There are arguments for and against this approach.

Membership and recruitment

Although appointment is the responsibility of the Councils the JLAF should perhaps have some role in the process next time round.

Frequency of meetings and attendance

Is everybody happy?

Ron Phelps
January 2007