

**Joint Local Access Forum (JLAF) for Bath & North East Somerset,
Bristol City and South Gloucestershire**

Conference for LAF Members in the South East 3rd March 2009

I attended the above Conference which was held at the CSSC, Chadwick Street, Westminster on 3rd March 2009. There were 50 names on the list of attendees, 32 of whom are lay members of the 17 South East LAFs, 10 are Officers plus 8 others mainly from East Anglia.

The format consisted of introductory remarks about the development of the relationship between LAFs and Natural England and then a plenary session entitled *Coastal Access – how will it be delivered? What role for the LAFs*, followed by a choice of two group sessions. Hilary Winter, Regional Co-ordinator for the South West and I arranged that we did not both attend the same sessions. I took *Why and how to work with the local community and Gating Orders – what are they and what is the LAF's role?*

The Coastal Access session was led by Tom Lord, a (relatively junior, I guess) Natural England Officer based in Lyndhurst. The presentation, based largely on the "Access Audit" touched on a few main points of alignment of the route, the concept of plugging the gaps, timescales and the "Challenge Fund" to get it done. Statistics for existing footpaths and other access were given but confused – it not being clear what categories were inclusive/exclusive. To make it relevant emphasis was laid on the consultative role of LAFs. I began to worry at this point because we know that locally some influential members of LAFs have indicated that they do not see the need for more coastal access. However in response to questions it was made clear that other interested parties are currently being consulted.

There were quite a lot of questions from the floor, mostly basic ones about the fundamentals of the scheme. However, two innocent questions are arguably highly contentious and at the heart of the scheme although Tom did not seem to realise their political sensitivity: "What about compensation?" And "What about compulsion/right of appeal"? It is to be hoped that the assertion that where land owners are obdurate the path will be routed inland does not represent Natural England policy. It was pointed out that the House of Lords is debating the Marine and Coastal Access Bill later this week. We shall have to follow the debate to get a clearer picture of what is going on.

And so to *Why and how to work with local communities* which was led by a lay member of the New Forest LAF, Ruth Croker and an officer from Hampshire, Cath Hart who is also, I think, the South East Regional Co-ordinator. There appear to be two main thrusts to engaging with the local community in the New Forest – Area based workshops and attendance at "events". The workshops, three across the area, are an ambitious attempt to ask people what they want regarding access having lectured them first on the constraints. The latter means setting up a stall at something like the New Forest Show and talking to people showing an interest. Information is then fed back to organisations that might be able to deliver.

The very pertinent question was asked, "How do you handle disappointed expectations?" There was engaged discussion of this point. One answer seems to be feedback to respondents. There was more discussion about the role of RoWIPs. One of the participants said that theirs contains a wish list of

routes something which our Councils shied away from. The main task, however, was to try to extrapolate from the New Forest experience to our own in the JLAF. This is not easy because the New Forest is a new National Park with a lot of open access. So I suspect that money/management is relatively abundant and the issues are about managing/improving already available access not desperately trying to get a path along the skyline or round a lake. I suspect, also, that New Forest folk are used to contributing to such consultation although it was admitted that even there it is difficult to get land owners and farmers to take part.

Gating Orders – what are they and what is the LAF's role? was led by Dave Brookshaw and a colleague from Brighton and Hove. We were given a good brief résumé of the law. This was followed by two contrasting experiences in Brighton one of which could be supported by the LAF, the other apparently being more to do with someone wanting to protect or enhance the value of their property rather than fear of crime. There followed a lively discussion with relevant input from Medway and Slough. The best learning point was that in some cases the sheer number of Orders could overwhelm a LAF if each were to be given full consideration. It was suggested that one way to control this is to insist that Councils have a thorough protocol (policy) which demands that a full written case is made out for each and every proposal. I hope this is the direction in which the JLAF's Councils are heading.

In the short closing session there was general agreement that the event had been worthwhile with differing views expressed on the length, time of day and venue. It appeared that it helped to build a sense of identity and direction. We are, though only talking about an average of two lay members from each LAF so how it impacts on the wider membership is a moot point. My experience is that the average LAF member has little knowledge of issues outside their own specialism. So this is not a mechanism for serious debate but can be useful to increase general awareness of the access agenda.

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