

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF SW LAF CHAIRS AND REPRESENTATIVES 10 November 2010

Natural England, Taunton

Present:

LAFs – Mike Amos (Chairman, North Somerset LAF), Eric Clark (Vice Chairman, Wiltshire and Swindon LAF), Ray Fairchild (Chairman, Plymouth LAF), Bob Harvey (Torbay LAF), Greg Jones (Vice Chairman, Somerset LAF), Robin Milton (Interim Chairman, Exmoor LAF), Ray Newbigin (Chairman, JLAF and SW member on the England Access Forum), Graham Ronan (Chairman, Cornwall CAF), Justin Robbins (Chairman, Devon CAF) Patrick Watson (Chairman, Dartmoor AF), Alison Williamson (Vice Chairperson, Gloucestershire LAF).

Natural England – Ciaran Gannon (Regional Director), Neil Constable (SW Partnerships team), Colin Jones (SW Partnerships team), Hilary Winter (Regional Coordinator)

Apologies: Dominic Acland (Chairman, Torbay LAF), Mike Beams (Chairman, Dorset LAF), Paul Heal (Chairman, Somerset LAF and SW EAF member)

Ray Newbigin chaired the meeting.

NATURAL ENGLAND SESSION

Ciaran Gannon, Regional Director for Natural England since April 2010, was welcomed. He outlined his background in farm management and with the Rural Development Service where he became Head of the Farm Advice Unit. Within Natural England he previously had a national role developing evidence and policy positions based on the State of the Natural Environment Report. For two and a half years he was Chair of Community Delivery overseeing resources for People and Access work.

Changes in Natural England

- In February 2010, NE commenced a performance and efficiency programme with a view to cuts. Following the election meetings were held with the new Secretary of State and non-departmental Government bodies. An Arms Length Body Review was also carried out. The outcome is that NE will be retained but “substantially reformed”. The implications of the Comprehensive Spending Review for NE are not yet fully known.
- Natural England aims to reduce staff numbers by 30%, a reduction of 800 by 2014, with half in 2011, hopefully through voluntary redundancy.
- NE will be the delivery arm of Defra and will NOT deal with policy. NE will be seen as a facilitator to deliver more access and engagement

through the third sector and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). NE's strategic direction has been re-assessed. Dealing with communities will be to the fore, picking up on the Government's localism agenda.

- NE's capacity to deliver support to LAFs is not yet known.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Discussion was far ranging and covered a number of topics. Mr Gannon's comments on a number of issues are briefly summarised below.

Engaging with the public and "educating" them as to the need for LAFs

It was noted it was difficult to get the public to attend LAF meetings.

The Prime Minister is serious about engaging local communities and devolving more power to local level. Involving communities is seen as the hook to provide long term sustainable benefits. Delivery of agri-environment schemes should be more flexible. Investment is needed in training/education within a tight legal structure to ensure communities can be involved.

In North Somerset LAF each LAF member is assigned a number of parish councils to liaise with.

The policy agenda

The policy process is no longer on the agenda. NE will still have a role in providing evidence and guidance.

Ecosystem services and green infrastructure

Jeremy Eppel has been appointed to look at the future of the uplands in Defra and an ecosystems service pilot is being carried out on Dartmoor to enable informed decisions on the way forward. (The Mires project on Exmoor is a similar project). In Plymouth valuable GI work is being done, linked to developer tariffs – section 106.

Localism

The Government philosophy is directed towards smaller or more local government with more power locally. Grass roots projects do not run counter to this.

Rural Development Programme for England

Environmental improvements were delivered under pillar 2 of the Common Agricultural Policy through the RDPE to NE. Socio-economic work was delivered through the Regional Development Agency. It is likely that individuals working on Axis 1, Axis 3 and Leader will be transferred to Defra but delivery mechanisms were unclear as yet.

There were more applications than anticipated for Local Enterprise Partnerships. It was not anticipated that RDPE work would transfer to LEPs.

LAFs as advisory bodies

Although NE was no longer a policy body it did not undermine the LAFs advisory role. LAFs had a role in providing information on the practical implications of policy. With representation from different groups and the 'local' name, LAFs fitted well with the localism agenda.

NE – changing functions

- The number of NE offices was reducing to 20 by 2014.
- NE is moving from a regional structure to a functional approach with directors in distinct areas of work to create efficiencies and monetary savings. The executive Board of Directors had been reduced from six to four.
- Four new areas of business will be:-
 - Capability (Dave Webster)
 - Science and evidence (Andrew Wood)
 - Customers (Guy Thompson)
 - Communities (Jim Smyllie)

Delivery with communities will be the largest area and will include access, farming and links with communities and local authorities.

The 'customer' background of the directors was challenged. NE would expect LAFs to challenge if they considered the customer focus did not improve.

NE legal obligations for LAFs

Under Regulation 19, Natural England had to maintain a list of forums and contact details and receive annual reports. As a section 94(4) body NE also had an obligation to consult LAFs.

LAFs advice on delivery and profile

Comment was made that Sustrans in North Somerset had complained about the LAFs role in giving advice on the delivery of schemes. NE staff agreed LAFs had a role in advising on all areas of access to land. The only constraint was that bodies who were not section 94(4) bodies were not obliged to give due regard to the advice.

There were many opportunities for LAFs to assist, particularly with local authorities under pressure to prioritise.

Some district councils and other organisations had not heard of LAFs. It was important to raise the profile so LAFs were Local Development Framework consultees.

LAF Handbook

The LAF Handbook was a good initiative and resource. A condensed version was being discussed by regional LAF coordinators at a forthcoming teleconference and views were invited.

Sale of the Public Forest Estate

Although it was stated that “public access would be unaffected,” concern was raised about the sale of woodland and changes in access through dedication that could be achieved through legal processes. Other concerns were impeding access through car parking charges, gates etc. Torbay LAF was preparing a letter for the Secretary of State and a copy would be made available to other LAFs.

The Forestry Commission was a public body responding to economic challenges and there was Government discussion about the role of public bodies owning land and how to manage this in response to localism/Big Society agendas. NE was also under scrutiny in terms of its estate of about 250 National Nature Reserves. NE was reducing management agreements with landowners and encouraging management through Higher Level Stewardship.

Coastal access and Recreational trails

Coastal access still had support from the Government which was positive. Neil Constable, NE, reported that Weymouth would be delivered in time for the Olympics. Somerset was in the next phase. Further projects may depend on the ramifications of the Comprehensive Spending Review. Dorset LAF had been involved and had responded to the Weymouth report. There was the opportunity for LAFs to get involved.

NE’s core role was in open access and coastal access. National trails were important but NE’s statutory role was more limited. Inevitably some budget cut had to be planned for. Coastal access would be a national trail but with a liability to maintain and an expectation that NE would continue to make a contribution to maintenance.

Comment was made that there was no flexibility to respond to coastal access opportunities, particularly on a one-off basis; for example in North Somerset where a bid could be made to the Local Sustainable Transport Fund (time limited) for a cycling trail to dovetail with coastal access. LAFs could raise this point with Defra.

Health

Comment was made on the useful work in this area done by Dr Adrian Davis (Bristol Primary Care Trust/Bristol City Council) and Peter Ashcroft (Physical Activity Regional Lead, Government Office SW, on secondment from Natural England).

In July 2009 NE launched its Natural Health Service. Evidence clearly shows that enjoyment of the outdoors delivers benefits. This work would be approached differently now with involvement by NGOs and the third sector.

More opportunities and facilities were required to secure the health benefits of outdoor recreation.

NE hoped to continue work on green infrastructure.

Valuing the outdoors

Torbay Council was evaluating its trees, with potential health benefits.

The ecosystem services approach on Dartmoor was aimed at producing a monetary value. It was important to get the language and the science right.

NEXT MEETING

Mr Gannon suggested a further updating meeting with LAF Chairs in late February/early March and requested LAFs to produce 5 or 6 top tasks which they want NE to take forward. Some initial thoughts were raised.

Action: LAFs to consider key tasks for NE to take forward.

- ***Section 94(4) bodies***

There was a feeling that Section 94(4) bodies were unfamiliar with LAF work, were not consulting LAFs or giving sufficient time for response.

- ***RoWIP***

Across the region some LAFs were more aspirational than others. Some LAFs were involved in compiling or reviewing the RoWIP. Gloucestershire LAF had a RoWIP sub-group, North Somerset LAF was updating the RoWIP with an officer present too take notes, with a shadow document. JLAF was producing an Outdoors West website and was central to the RoWIP writing and implementation.

Some RoWIP projects would be funded through LTP3. LAFs should press for the RoWIP to be an integral part of the LTP and not a daughter document. Implementing the RoWIP in the current financial climate was challenging.

The NE guide to the RoWIP and LTP integration was acknowledged as excellent.

- ***Stakeholder Working Group and Definitive Map Review***

The Stepping Forward Report from the Stakeholder Working Group had been presented to Defra but no response had yet been received. A budget for the proposals had not been part of the group's terms of reference.

Across the region progress on Definitive Map Orders varied significantly. The backlog in Plymouth (700-800 cases) was particularly acute with concern that completion by 2026 was impossible. The pace of development meant many paths could be lost. Plymouth LAF members were re-visiting paths on a voluntary basis. In Wiltshire the backlog was 185.

Legislation needed to be tightened so local authorities can more easily assess the impact on potential rights of way from development and seek opportunities to develop rights of way and green infrastructure.

In Torbay the Coast and Countryside Service had been devolved from the Council, providing greater opportunity to divert and create paths and respond to local need.

- ***Volunteering***

The compensation culture could create problems for volunteering. In North Somerset risk assessments had to be carried out by a qualified person for insurance purposes. Volunteers through Ramblers had to have the same risk assessment.

NE uses wardens on the Cotswold Way for basic maintenance, as part of the AONB voluntary service. This proved very successful.

On Exmoor unpaid volunteers were 30% up, with a spread of age groups.

In Somerset and Devon footpath volunteers in parishes carried out some work.

Volunteers needed to be trained and supported with responsibilities transferred. It was not a cost free process. Use of existing organisations such as the BTCV and the NT was encouraged.

It was confirmed NE had no formal links with the Learning and Skills Council.

- ***Retaining LAF focus and interaction between LAF Chairs***

NE and local authority support was required to ensure LAFs retained focus and benefited from networking.

- ***Money for LAFs***

The money which went from Defra to local authorities through the block grant to support LAFs was not identified.

- ***Local Transport Plan 3 and Sustainable Transport Fund***

The LTP, in which several LAFs had been involved in providing evidence or commenting on drafts, provided great opportunities to secure walking and cycling projects in both rural and urban areas. These gave health benefits and could often be built quickly. The benefit/cost ratios of such schemes were 19:1 compared to 1 or 2:1 for large highway schemes.

It was agreed NE had valuable knowledge and expertise in sustainable transport. A request was made for NE to talk to Norman Baker, Secretary of State for Transport, to secure a position on the board assessing the Local Sustainable Transport Fund project bids. NE was

also asked to ascertain whether all appropriate NE officers were feeding into the LTP process – Amanda Grundy in the NE Bristol office was.

Action: NE to look at composition of Local Sustainable Transport Fund project bid board and NE input to LTP process.

AFTERNOON – LAF SESSION

Support for LAFs

Concern was expressed about the diminishing support for LAFs, either in terms of the number of meetings or officer support. Most LAFs were meeting three times a year. Plymouth and Cornwall met 6 times a year. Somerset and Wiltshire were reducing to twice yearly meetings, with reduced levels of officer support. It was agreed it would be difficult at that level for LAFs to have much impact and they could become merely a rubber-stamping Forum. JLAF was protesting about the axing of liaison groups.

Public rights of way officers generally attended meetings. The geographical smaller LAFs often had evening meetings (Torbay, Plymouth, Exmoor, Dartmoor). Gloucestershire and Cornwall usually made meetings a whole day, combining a site visit/awareness raising session. Training days, for example in Dartmoor and Devon, were well supported.

Workloads of officers and councillors meant that in some instances they could only make a reduced contribution. Merging of officers at senior level had produced a similar effect.

It was suggested that LAFs should go to Executive members and directors for support if the LAF cannot function effectively.

It was confirmed that deliberations of working groups needed to be taken to full Forum meetings for ratification.

The way of appointing LAF members varied across the region with only two or three involving LAF members in the recruitment process.

Annual Reports

The content of the LAF annual report was independent from the authority although the authority had an obligation to publish it.

It was felt reports should be printed as not everyone has internet access.

England Access Forum

A discussion on the EAF was held. Its future now rested with Defra and NE following the LAF responses to the recent consultation on the EAF, sent out jointly by NE and EAF.

Cross-compliance

Currently the Rural Payments Agency would only react to a complaint (outside their sample inspection programme) if it had gone through enforcement or been brought to their attention by the local authority. This was a problem if the authority had limited officers. It was sometimes difficult for wardens as they were trying to establish good relations with landowners. NE was asked to look at whether LAFs have a role to play in advising the RPA, not currently a section 94(4) body.

Action: NE to explore potential role for LAFs in cross-compliance issues.