

National LAF Conferences 2013 – 14

Plenary Session

Bristol Conference:
Liz Newton, Natural England

Durham Conference:
Martin Shaw, Natural England

Summary

The Chairs thanked members for attending, presenters for their contribution and staff for their effort in ensuring a smooth conference.

They reminded LAFs that Defra and NE are grateful for their time in volunteering and NE were very aware of the contribution LAFs made to improving access for everyone to enjoy the natural environment.

They asked LAFs if we can do anything else to help. A rolling microphone was suggested as an improvement so delegates at the back could hear the questions.

Question and Answers

Q: Why isn't there one national LAF conference this year as in the past?

A: Last year only one national LAF conference was held in Sheffield but the year before that, two were held, north and south the same as this year. As budgets have been cut and NE cannot pay for delegate's transport costs, holding two national conferences is a way to try and keep transport costs down for the LAFs/AAs. The two conferences have roughly the same agenda though with different speakers in some cases. Although travel expenses cannot be paid for, refreshments and lunch is provided. NE facilitates these conferences but the content is driven by the LAFs via the Regional Coordinators.

Q: What will change after today's conference?

A: Martin Shaw. Notes and materials from both the conferences will be uploaded onto Huddle where there will be the opportunity for LAFs to continue the debate there. We now produce an annual report as a result of listening to LAFs, which goes to the Minister. This reflects the good work of LAFs and raises the profile. The main point of the conference is to enable members to meet and share good practice, it is an opportunity to network with other members and encourage LAFs to work smarter with information provided in workshops and shared around the conference.

Q: There is discussion but things are getting worse. Morale is low in many LAFs and lack of funding an issue.

A: Lack of funding is an issue everywhere though discussions and conversations can help to try and use diminishing resources to best effect.

Observation: Request for updates on NE other Access related work (Coastal access, National Trails, Open Access)

Q: Is there any chance that access be brought back into HLS

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A: Unlikely, but the new environmental land management scheme (NELMS) has not yet been finalised. NE are pushing hard for access.

Q: The issues of higher rights users' needs more focus, and it would be useful to have funding to deal with the backlog of DMM claims. Higher Rights users need a higher profile

A: P4C has aimed to improve the network for higher rights users.

Q: Farmers/landowners will withdraw their permissive route when the funding runs out.

A: This is understood, NE will look to encourage farmers to dedicate the routes (where desirable) but there will be no requirement for them to do so.

Q: Paths in Crisis – 4000 DMO's, how many are for higher rights?

A: The question is not asked but this will be looked at in future years.

Q: The LAF Monitoring Form – re the question, 'how many DMMO's have the LAF commented on' LAF should not be commenting on specifics like this their role should be more strategic. There is an impression that the LAF are being marked down for not being involved in DMMO's.

A: The form is simply gathering information; no judgement is made of the information that is included. Helping to build a much better evidence base.

Q: Coastal Access – can LAF get involved in the process prior to their section being worked up by NE?

A: We will talk to the CA team

Q: What level of support can the LAF expect from Gov.

A: Ministers are supportive; LAF's fit well with the localism agenda.

Observation: Economic evidence – one LAF's reflection on the value of this is that a large estate was not engaged with the argument that a better RoW network on their land could increase visitor numbers. However the same estate has been encouraged to take action to improve the network by taking a strategic approach. Talk to landowners- local level knowledge essential. NE should support LAFs by producing statistics and evidence.

Q: Disused (mineral) railway lines could be opened up for access. Possible Huddle whiteboard for discussion.

A: Network Rail own a few, but these are generally where there is some strategic need, i.e. they may re-open the rail line. All those not needed have been sold off to local authorities, local landowners or Sustrans and others. Mineral lines were not part of Network Rails remit

Observation: The conference has been appreciated and we (LAF) would welcome one next year either one single (preferred) or north and south as was done this year.

Observation: The LAF need a national networking facility.(Chairs talking to each other)