

National LAF Annual Report - April 2012 to March 2013

Foreword by Natural England

I am delighted to introduce Natural England's annual report to Defra on the work that Local Access Forums achieved during the year ending 31st March 2013. We believe it presents an excellent illustration of how LAFs are influencing local access issues as well as giving a realistic assessment of the challenges they are facing.

In February 2013 we hosted the National LAF Conference, with the theme 'Sharing Good Practice – Sharing Solutions'. This report echoes that theme as we share examples of how the body of volunteers who comprise the LAFs are working at a local level to deliver improved access opportunities for the communities they serve.

LAFs have been active in a range of areas: their direct input to plans and strategies has delivered material gains for access; they have facilitated joint working and partnership approaches; they produce information and guidance that both enables people to access the countryside and developers to improve the infrastructure they provide; and they promote volunteering and harness this energy to increase public benefit.

This report will be passed on to the Minister so that he is aware of the good work that LAFs do. It will also be used as a wider promotional tool, hopefully to inspire the LAF members across England to continue and expand their good work, but also to encourage others to recognise the valuable role that LAFs can play at a local level to engage with and enhance a range of agendas, from health to economic development.

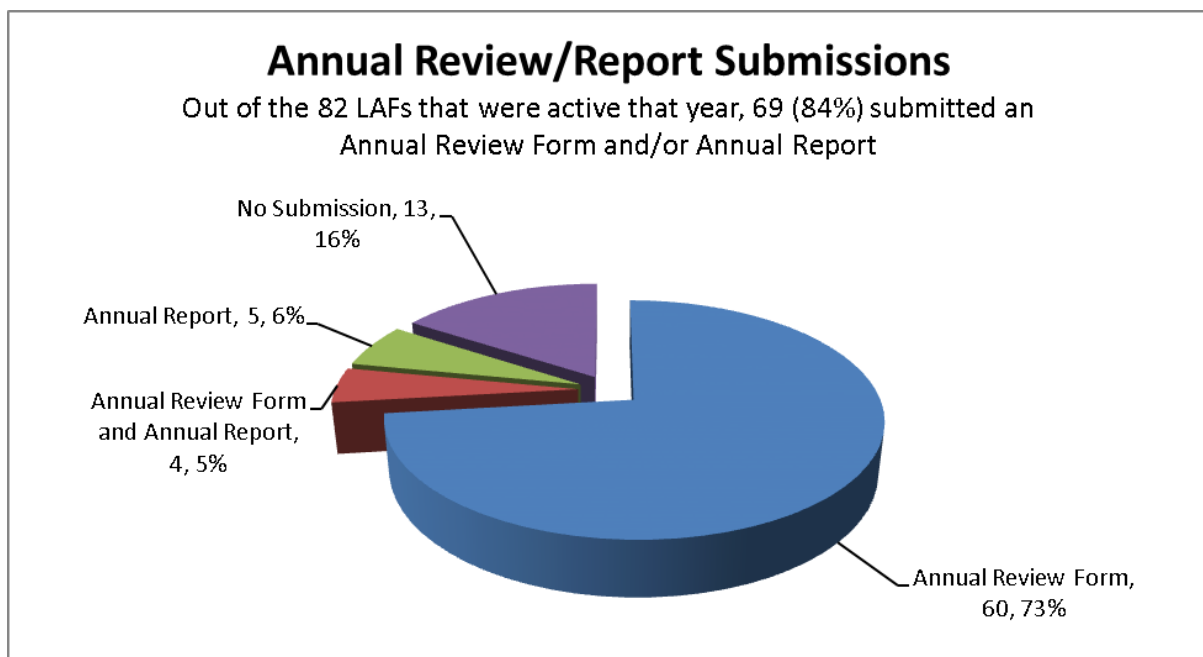
Liz Newton
Natural England Director, Access and Engagement
January 2014

1. Introduction

Natural England has responsibilities set out in the CROW Act (section 19 of the 2007 regulations) to receive annual reports from all LAFs. This report summarises all of the LAF annual reports received covering the period April 2012 to March 2013. The report provides statistics on LAFs and the activities they have undertaken, highlights some of the achievements reported, identifies issues and makes recommendations on improvements that could be made.

LAFs were asked to submit an annual report to Natural England, by the 31st October. The LAF Regional Coordinators produced summary reports for their region which have also been used to inform this report.

The final submission results are as follows:



2. LAF achievements

Examples of LAF activities in their annual reports are wide-ranging. The following is a selection of achievements that have helped to secure access benefits for local communities:

Bracknell Forest LAF – The LAF helped organise a walking and outdoor festival to celebrate and promote the borough’s public rights of way. Activities included walking and cycling to suit all abilities. There was a good turn out and positive feedback with many participants expressing an interest in pursuing more outdoor activities and volunteering. Smaller sessions may be held in future, as it would be difficult to hold a similar big event on a regular basis.

Central Bedfordshire and Luton LAF – The LAF were involved in the production of the Central Bedfordshire Outdoor Access Improvement Plan 2013 - 31 and also the significant reduction in the number of stiles within the local rights of way network.

Cheshire/Cheshire East LAF – The LAF submitted a formal response to the Highways Agency’s local Environmental Improvement Scheme consultation. Some of the LAF’s suggestions have been taken on board, most notably, the recommendation that part of a de-trunked road be made into a traffic-free route for non-motorised users.

County Durham LAF - Following a request from the LAF, Durham County Council agreed to dedicate two pieces of land as open access.

Cumbria LAF – The LAF provided advice to Natural England on the first and second stretches of the Coastal Trail in the Northwest.

Devon Countryside Access Forum (CAF) – The CAF produced a guidance note for liaison with landowners/land managers when new routes are proposed. They continued to encourage the county to adopt a policy of multi-user routes and provided a major response to the Defra consultation on Improvements to the Legal and Policy Framework for Public Rights of Way. The CAF have been involved in pre-draft discussions on the County Cycling Strategy and, with Devon Wildlife Trust, on a significant new access site following acquisition of a former ball clay quarry.

Essex LAF – The LAF facilitated a series of meetings between the access authority and a local planning authority to try to resolve two long-term obstruction cases and to encourage more joined up working in the future.

Hertfordshire LAF – The LAF lobbied Lafarge Tarmac to improve access to a new country park at Panshanger, Hertford and the first 3 mile route is now open. They engaged with the Local Nature Partnership to ensure access issues are included on

their agenda and also with the local authority's 'Active Travel Strategy' consultation, keeping the needs of non-motorised users firmly on the agenda.

Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol City and South Gloucestershire Joint LAF (JLAF) - The Avon Ramblers' Voluntary Wardens scheme was successfully established and work parties installed gates and cleared vegetation on the public rights of way network. A 'Walkers are Welcome' working group was established and parish councils, for areas which could potentially be included in the scheme, were contacted to gauge their interest.

The JLAF sought to positively influence the behaviour of the minority of dog walkers who cause problems on the network by producing and distributing advice about cleaning up after dogs and keeping dogs under control. They also sought to identify potential improvements to the bridleway network and prioritise missing links in the network which could improve facilities for horse riders.

Leicester City LAF - The Forum responded with enthusiasm to the works being undertaken within the city centre and issued advice on some of the proposals. Interest in the public realm and improvements for pedestrians and cyclists using the city centre is a departure from previous issues considered by the LAF.

Leicestershire LAF - The LAF lead a proposed Unrecorded and Lost Ways project which forms part of a Landscape Partnership bid to the HLF. The Forum established an Unrecorded Ways sub-group to co-ordinate this and to give a specific focus to its activities in this field. The LAF sees this as the first step to enable the research to move forward throughout the rest of the County.

The LAF continued to be involved in discussions with the County Council about using volunteers. This included unrecorded rights of way as noted above, and additional support for promoting and using paths. The Forum also raised the possibility of closer work with the few larger areas of open access land in the county.

The LAF alerted parishes and user groups to the permissive access provided by EU Higher Level Stewardship funding. Members of the LAF continued to encourage Parish Councils to discuss with farmers the possibility of this access being retained, particularly in cases where the sites deliver real public benefits, once the funding ends.

Manchester, Salford & Trafford Joint LAF – The LAF worked with the city council on changes to management of an area which has ensured better and safer access (tackling fear of crime) and protection of wildlife.

New Forest LAF – The LAF are represented on the key decision making committees convened by the National Park Authority to promote recreation and implement the Recreation Management Strategy. They were actively involved in the design of a programme for the visit to the New Forest of the Independent Panel on

Forestry. They also took part in hosting the visit, and in particular were able to demonstrate the involvement of the community in the protection, conservation and enjoyment of the Forest. They joined with New Forest Access for All group in making representations to New Milton Town Council on recommending improvements to access to a recreation ground, with particular emphasis on mobility scooter access.

The LAF engaged with the Board of Management for the £16m New Forest EU Higher Level Stewardship Scheme and achieved greater transparency through an Annual Report and public meeting. They also succeeded in re-establishing a direct input into the county Common Agricultural Policy management programme.

Nottingham City LAF – The LAF were involved in pre-planning application discussions to advise on how the design and layout of public paths can complement development. All members were given a shared responsibility and involvement. The forum developed a series of self-guided walks across Nottingham which involved an on-line leaflet.

Rotherham LAF – The LAF was successful in carrying out a range of access improvement works including new and replacement ROW furniture, vegetation clearing, surface improvements and signposting. The LAF also provided advice and support on a number of high profile developments, including Connect 2 schemes, and continued dialogue to enhance access at housing developments and canal link improvements.

Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead LAF – The LAF's recommendation to the Council to use volunteer labour for path works has resulted in over 900 volunteer working hours since 2011. The LAF monitored the use of volunteers for vegetation clearance and path repair work on the public rights of way network, receiving regular reports at each meeting. Discussion with the local authorities has led to a recommendation for the borough council to retain routine maintenance responsibilities.

The LAF also made direct improvements to the public rights of way network in several ways including: setting up a working group to develop a proposal for a 'Multi-user route' which opened in May 2013 for a 1 year trial period; creating a "Millennium walk" missing link using the forum's Permitted Path Pack; recommending improvement to bridleway links in the Borough, including Horse Margins; advising on a new Easy Going Route leaflet, on new guidance notes for dog walkers and on a new Public Rights of Way information booklet.

Sandwell LAF – The LAF organised field meetings with adjacent LAFs, initiated a successful marathon and mobilised volunteer support from the local Ramblers Group. They used the services of a local Community Payback team to clean up several footpaths and open spaces blighted by litter and rubbish. Birmingham Rights of Way Department were persuaded to announce they intend to make a modification order to record a long time obstructed path leading into Sandwell Valley, on the

Definitive Map as a Restricted Byway. This action was directly as a result of the field meeting held jointly with Birmingham LAF in March 2013.

Shropshire LAF - The LAF has established a closer working relationship with Public Health who are now part of Shropshire Council. This was demonstrated at the Annual LAF Conference, where the LAF secretary and Public Health lead for physical activity ran a workshop on health and LAF involvement.

South Downs LAF - The LAF was appointed as a brand new LAF for the new National Park. One of the big jobs for the National Park Authority and all its partners and stakeholders was to produce a Partnership Management Plan which has recently been published and the LAF were an important consultee in formulating this. LAF members were invited to special engagement events and many of them were chosen to sit on the South Downs Partnership which oversaw the development of the plan.

Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent and Wolverhampton Joint LAF - The JLAF has commented on HS2's proposed high speed rail link and have been instrumental in ensuring that public access is maintained. Proposals have been incorporated by HS2. The LAF Bridleways Working Group has made recommendations on how bridleway provision in north Staffordshire could be enhanced.

The LAF supported Stoke-on-Trent City Council's successful bid to National Heritage Lottery for the Green Door Project which aims to encourage people to make more use of the green spaces in the city to improve physical and mental wellbeing and reduce isolation. The LAF sit on the Project Management Group to oversee the initiative. The LAF also supported a successful application for Paths for Communities funding for a project in the Forest of Mercia.

Stockport LAF – The LAF contributed to the completion of a key link in a Sustrans sponsored project as part of the National Cycle Network funded from a £250,000 Lottery grant. The new route has dramatically improved community links within Stockport, giving local people the chance to make more of their journeys without having to rely on a car.

Tees Valley Joint LAF – The JLAF played an active part in the establishment of the England Coastal Path and worked on the Heritage Lottery Fund programmes 'Limestone Landscapes' and 'River Tees Re-Discovered'. Limestone Landscapes will see improvements to the footpath network and complimentary to this the LAF has supported a Paths for Communities bid by Elwick Parish Council to Natural England.

The JLAF also focussed on potentially hazardous crossing points where footpaths cross the rail network and it is encouraging to see that Network Rail has addressed some of these issues.

Wakefield LAF - LAF members had two half day sessions waymarking paths, identifying where signs were needed and looking at any other path issues. The LAF supported the Paths for Communities project put forward by the Wakefield Cycle Forum and the proposal suggested by West Bretton Parish Council. It also supported a local cycle route project. The LAF were keen to encourage members of the public to meetings and Local Public Paths was added as a standard agenda item to allow members of the public to raise issues they would like to discuss with the LAF.

Walsall LAF – The LAF initiated an arrangement with the Ramblers Association to undertake voluntary maintenance such as path clearance and installation/ repair of infrastructure and signs/ waymakers.

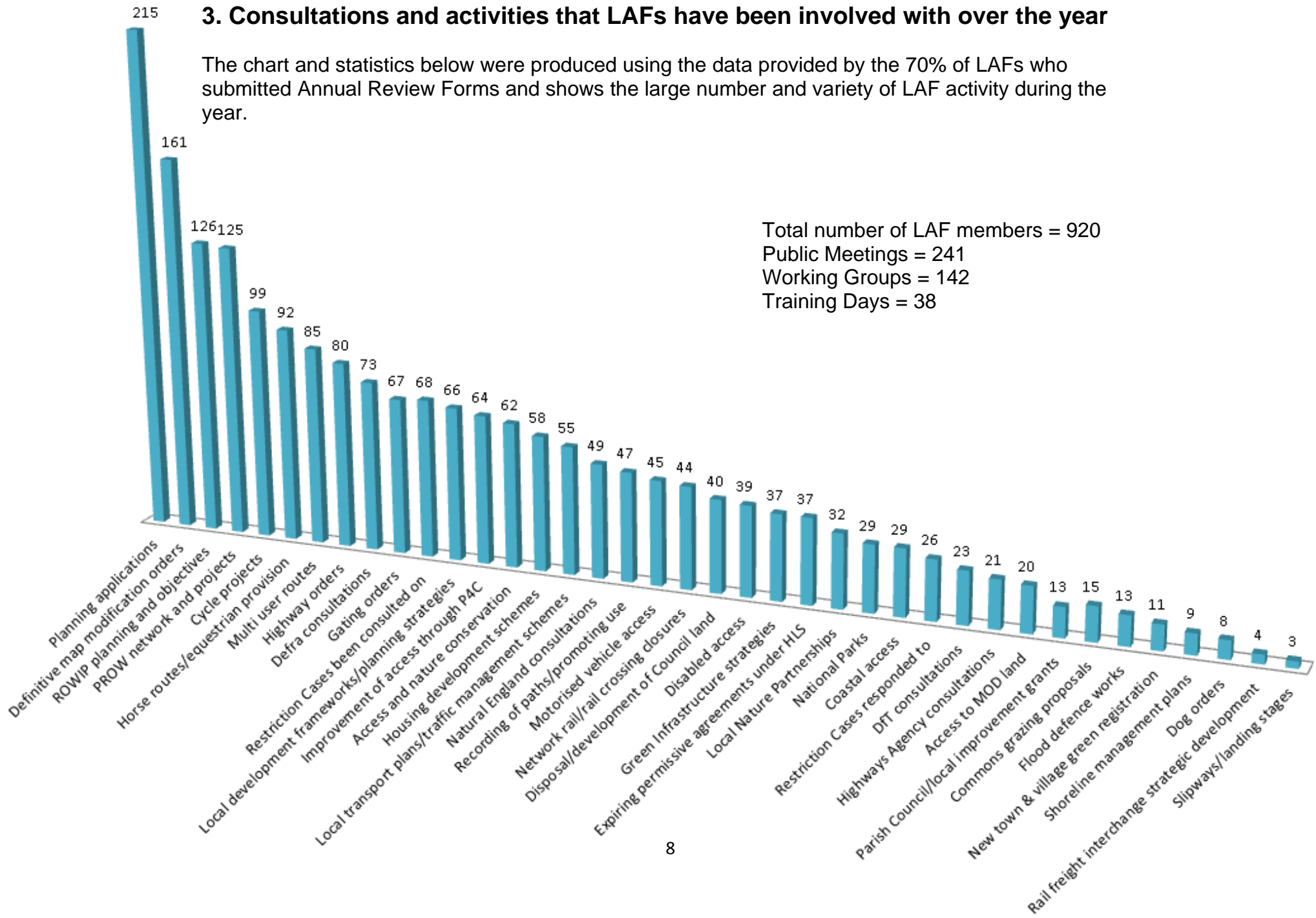
Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull LAF – The JLAF provided consistent and clear advice to the authorities in their dealings with the HS2 company and the authorities are working together to address the under-representation on cycling matters.

Wiltshire CAF – The CAF provided support for practical, ‘grassroots’ access improvement through a scheme operated in conjunction with Wiltshire Council which provided match funding for a range of projects brought forward by parish councils. Through the scheme CAF representatives were able to offer advice on how individual projects might be improved and developed to add further value to the network. This channel of communication with parish councils has identified other sources of community funding to invest in the RoW network. One particular initiative, to replace stiles with gates on a substantial scale throughout a district, proved especially successful in attracting financial backing from alternative community based funding streams.

They also established closer working with the North Wessex Downs AONB in conjunction with West Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Hampshire LAFs. The partnership has identified the need to collaborate with and influence the various Local Natura Partnership’s in the region to address a common concern that access to the countryside does not figure sufficiently in their priorities. LNPs are also seen as the critical gateway for influencing LEP’s and promoting the economic potential of access to the countryside. The AONB/LAF consortium will also seek to influence the respective destination management organisations to advocate the economic benefits of access to the countryside and its relationship with tourism development.

3. Consultations and activities that LAFs have been involved with over the year

The chart and statistics below were produced using the data provided by the 70% of LAFs who submitted Annual Review Forms and shows the large number and variety of LAF activity during the year.

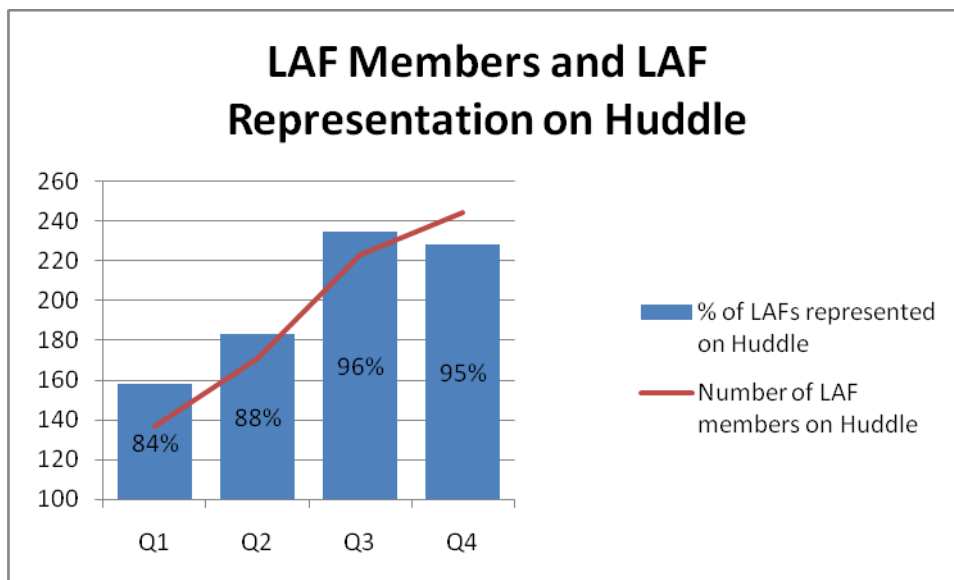


Total number of LAF members = 920
 Public Meetings = 241
 Working Groups = 142
 Training Days = 38

4. LAF communications and events

4.1 Huddle: internet based network to share information

The LAF workspace on Huddle was set up to help LAFs to work together and share good practice, and to facilitate communication with Natural England and Defra. Throughout the year the number of LAF members using Huddle increased to 244 with 95% of LAFs represented.



The following feedback from LAF Chairs and Secretaries regarding how easy they found Huddle to use and how frequently they used it was taken from the annual LAF survey.

How often do you use Huddle?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Daily		0.00%	0
2	Weekly	<div style="width: 28.79%; background-color: yellow;"></div>	28.79%	19
3	Monthly	<div style="width: 34.85%; background-color: blue;"></div>	34.85%	23
4	Other, please specify:	<div style="width: 36.36%; background-color: green;"></div>	36.36%	24
			answered	66
			skipped	12
Answers for: Other, please specify:			24 answers	

How would you rate Huddle for ease of use?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Very good		11.86%	7
2	Good		22.03%	13
3	Satisfactory		45.76%	27
4	Poor		16.95%	10
5	Very poor		3.39%	2
			answered	59
			skipped	19

How do you feedback information from Huddle to your LAF?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Email		39.34%	24
2	At meetings		62.30%	38
3	Don't feedback		21.31%	13
4	Other, please specify:		18.03%	11
			answered	61
			skipped	17
Answers for: Other, please specify:			<i>11 answers</i>	

Do you feel confident to join in discussions or post comments?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		67.24%	39
2	No		32.76%	19
			answered	58
			skipped	20

Do you feel confident to upload files or create / update Whiteboards?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		50.00%	30
2	No		50.00%	30
			answered	60
			skipped	18

The results of the survey give us confidence that Huddle is being used by LAFs and does indeed offer an important mechanism for enabling feedback and dialogue. More work needs to be done to improve the confidence of users to make best use of the facility.

4.2 LAF conference

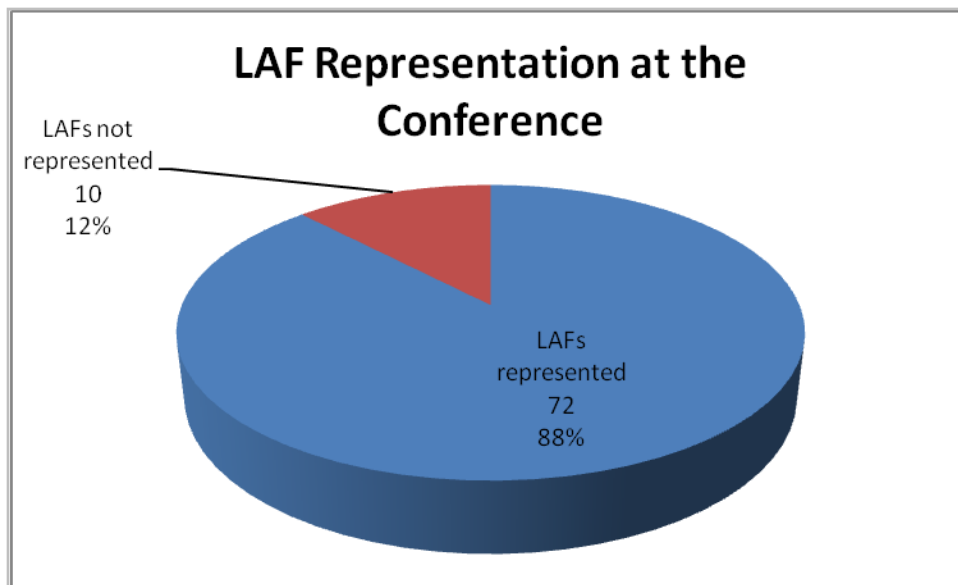
In February 2013, a national LAF conference was organised and hosted by Natural England in Sheffield with speakers from Defra/Natural England/Hampshire LAF and workshops led mainly by LAF members. The theme of the conference was 'Sharing good practice: sharing solutions'. The main presentations were

- Monitoring of Engagement with the Natural Environment – headlines from Natural England's annual survey – Natural England
- Providing Access to Hampshire's Heritage – Hampshire LAF
- Rights of Way Improvement Plans of the future – Defra

The workshops were on the following themes:

- Facilitating Disabled Access
- Green Infrastructure
- Huddle
- Engage with Health Agenda
- Multi-User Routes
- Local Nature Partnerships
- Paths for Communities Clinic
- Impacts of Cuts
- Planning Issues
- Open Access Clinic
- Working with Volunteers
- Urban LAFs

Of the 82 LAFs, 72 (88%) were represented at the conference.



Conference feedback forms (blanks were omitted from the data) revealed:



- Did the content of the day meet your objectives? = 100% Yes
- Conference organisation / logistics satisfaction:
Very satisfied 71%, Satisfied 26%, Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied 3%






Materials from the conference, including workshop notes and feedback from delegates, are available to download from the LAF Huddle Workspace and the Natural England website.


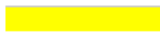



5. LAF survey



Between 8th and 28th March 2013 an online survey of LAF Chairs and Secretaries was conducted. A total of 78 responses were received (77 online, 1 emailed).



Questions covered a range of subjects for example:



Do you know who your LAF local contact is in Natural England?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		88.41%	61
2	No		11.59%	8
			answered	69
			skipped	9

How would you rate the level of support from your LAF local contact?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Very good		16.42%	11
2	Good		34.33%	23
3	Satisfactory		31.34%	21
4	Poor		13.43%	9
5	Very poor		4.48%	3
			answered	67
			skipped	11

How would you rate the level of support from Natural England nationally?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Very good		7.25%	5
2	Good		28.99%	20
3	Satisfactory		49.28%	34
4	Poor		13.04%	9
5	Very poor		1.45%	1
			answered	69
			skipped	9

Are you aware of the Defra guidance issued by the Secretary of State in 2007?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		85.51%	59
2	No		14.49%	10
			answered	69
			skipped	9

Do you use it?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		70.59%	48
2	No		29.41%	20
			answered	68
			skipped	10

Does it need to be revised?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes (provide details below)		45.61%	26
2	No		54.39%	31
			answered	62
			skipped	16
Answers for: If you answered 'Yes', how should it be revised?			32 answers	




Do you feel that you are fairly treated by Natural England?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		92.19%	59
2	No		7.81%	5
			answered	64
			skipped	14

Results roundup and feedback was produced and circulated to the LAFs via Huddle in April 2013 and suggestions and ideas recorded in the survey fed into the LAF Engagement Plan produced for the year 2013-14.

6. LAF Regional Coordinators

As with previous years, eight LAF Regional Coordinators were contracted by Natural England to help support the LAFs during the year. The Regional Coordinators arranged 18 regional meetings or conferences in 2012/13.

The following feedback from LAF Chairs and Secretaries on how they rated the level of support provided by the Regional Coordinators has been taken from the LAF survey.

How would you rate the level of support from your LAF regional coordinator?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Very good		52.24%	35
2	Good		34.33%	23
3	Satisfactory		13.43%	9
4	Poor		0.00%	0
5	Very poor		0.00%	0
			answered	67
			skipped	11

7. Issues and challenges identified by LAFs

The Annual Review Form provided to LAFs for their annual reporting included sections for LAFs to list some of the issues they have faced over the year along with their suggestions and ideas that could possibly help with these in the future.

The challenges faced included:

- problems in recruiting and retaining sufficient members and members that represent a diverse range of interests;
- difficulties in responding to planning consultations due to lack of notification and insufficient time for LAFs to respond;
- lack of understanding and awareness of the role of LAFs;
- reduced local authority resources leading to fewer meetings and reduced administrative support;
- reduced budgets for the local authority to undertake rights of way duties and inability to act on advice provided by LAFs;
- lack of clarity about terms of reference and meeting protocol.

Opportunities and suggestions included:

- Making LAFs formal consultees with planning authorities rather than receiving information via the Rights of Way section;
- Acknowledging the changing role of LAFs to become conduits and catalysts for other groups and initiatives eg Local Nature Partnerships, Local Enterprise Partnerships and Health and Wellbeing Boards, and funding bodies;
- Continuation of, or alternative to, the Paths for Communities Funding stream would help LAFs feel they can contribute more positively on the ground to access improvements and the implementation of aspirations in ROWIPs, alongside their advisory and strategic role.

Natural England and Defra are responding to these issues where possible, for example by introducing a LAF newsletter to celebrate the successes and raise the profile of LAFs with a wider group of bodies, and through arranging LAF run workshops on recruiting members to LAFs at the 2014 LAF conferences. Natural England is also supporting LAFs to share good practice through Huddle and at regular meetings and events.

8. Appointing authority feedback

Despite the many issues and challenges faced by the LAFs over the year, particularly regarding frustration through diminishing resources, many of the LAF appointing authorities had a number of positive comments to make about their work including:

- Gratitude for the commitment, dedication, breadth of experience and knowledge of the members;
- The valuable autonomy, independence and honesty of the LAFs and how they're not afraid to challenge authority;
- How many LAFs are well led and have a strong working relationship with local authority officers;
- Recognition of the significant amount of volunteer time given by their members.