

Local Access Forum National Conference (South)

Natural England, Temple Quay House, Bristol (100 yards from Temple Meads Station))

Tuesday 23 February 2016

Over 60 delegates attended this conference including representatives from Plymouth, Exmoor and Devon LAFs, also from Exmoor and Dartmoor National Parks.

This report is a personal impression by Torbay Local Access Forum delegate Bob Harvey and does not necessarily represent TLAF views.

Matt Heard, Natural England, introduced the day with a 20-minute talk. He had previously been involved with the disastrous "Lost Ways" which, despite substantial funding, had failed to establish public access to a single one "Lost Way".

Jonathan Tweeney from DEFRA has been involved with LAFs since their inception and outlined the RoW Reform Package and the Deregulation Act 2015. This needs a lot of interpretation in practice but it does allow for the possibility of extinguishing PRowS. A Stakeholder Group has been established and LAFs will not be consulted individually. The British Caving Association (BCA) is mounting a campaign to have caves recognised for public access under the CRoW Act 2000; this would not need a change in the Act.

John Cuthbertson and Arthur Lee gave a thorough presentation on the need for improved facilities for disabled access, but this concentrated almost entirely on catering for physical disabilities which required wheelchair access. Modern aids such as the "Tramper" have the ability to cope with rough terrain, but the photographs projected showed that this appeared to cause substantial damage to muddy footpaths. I also questioned the provision for the slightly disabled/aged who simply need a 'leaning bar' to take a rest at intervals, and those with perceptual difficulties of hearing and sight. These appeared to have been overlooked.

Nicola Greenwood from Wokingham outlined her stakeholders' guide to influencing your local council. While this demonstrated commitment and effort it was concerned almost wholly with improving the availability and quality of bridleways.

John Dennis outlined alternative funding sources for access projects, which linked with the Workshop on charitable status for LAF sub-groups. He encouraged LAFs to get away from the image of being concerned only with country RoWs, and urged links with sport, health and tourism interests. The cost : benefits ratio for public open air exercise has been established as around 1:3 or 1:4 - a very good investment for the central government but not as easy for local government. One suggestion justifies particular note, that OS maps showing footpaths should be on display in all hospitals and doctors' surgeries.

Workshop 1 Charitable status.

Seamus Elliott and Martin Sullivan from Norfolk outlined the enormous effort they had invested in enabling Norfolk LAF to "get things done". However, they acknowledged that establishing charitable status and preparing a legal constitution to form an operational arm of a LAF takes "time and dedication", and demands a detailed evidence base.

Workshop 2 2026

Phil Wadey and Sarah Bucks of the Open Spaces Society emphasised that the deadline date of 2026 is critical for the identification and registration of "white roads" to become

Other Routes with Public Access (ORPAs). Much research is required but the benefits can justify it. Look for breaks in routes and list them systematically. Also check the 1910 Finance Act which lists Turnpike Roads, and the records of previous local authorities such as Rural District Councils.

The main impression I brought from this conference is that Government policy is a juggernaut of privatisation of services beneficial to the public, even to the extent of privatising statutory services such as responsibility for LAFs. The convenient justification is that the footwork can be undertaken by volunteers who have a better understanding of local needs. An example is a Neighbourhood Plan which can be drawn up by volunteers and would have influence equal to the Local Plan. However, a Local Plan has funding, officer time and expertise provided by the local authority whereas a Neighbourhood Plan depends almost entirely on a dedicated band of willing and able volunteers over a period of many years.

Could this be a convenient method of Government abrogating its governmental responsibilities under the guise of "localism" ? You may form your own opinions.

Bob Harvey

March 2016