



Report from the SW Region LAF Conference 20 October 2010

Dartmoor National Park

Kindly hosted by Dartmoor National Park, the SW Region LAF Conference was attended by representatives from nine of the twelve LAFs in the region. Twenty LAF members (including seven Chairmen), ten LAF secretaries and appointing authority officers and one Natural England member of staff were present, plus the speaker and five workshop leaders.

Keynote address

Stephen Lees, Recreation and Public Affairs Manager, Peninsula District, Forestry Commission outlined the FC's role in promoting recreational opportunities.



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Key statistics

1. The FC receives 40m visits a year and is the largest single provider of countryside leisure visits.
2. It provides 264 waymarked trails, safe off-road cycling, 32 play areas and 14 Go-Ape sites.
3. There are 40 key sites, 4 in the Peninsula district, and 24 visitor centres.
4. Over half the population lives within 6 miles of one of the FC woods, particularly on the urban fringe.
5. In the Peninsula district there are 200 woodlands, totalling 38,000 acres. There has been a policy of selling small woods.
6. Major destinations in the SW are Haldon and Cardinham. Parking and limited facilities are provided at a further 20 sites.
7. Open access, under the CRoW Act, is provided on freehold sites. Leasehold sites (999 year) have some dedicated or permissive access. The small access land sign is used with a FC logo.

Main woods in the SW

- Cann Woods, edge of Plymouth. Off-road biking is tolerated and managed.
- Stoke Woods – SSSI and promotion of broadleaves.

- Bellever, Dartmoor; Ranscombe, Quantocks. Picnic areas and toilets. Introduction of charging at Bellever has been contentious with local people. Raises approximately £10-15,000 per annum to retain and maintain facilities.
- Cardinham Woods – café.
- Haldon – 300,000 visits a year. 70% come to cycle.
- Mamhead - sensory trail and all ability access trail.

Other FC opportunities

- The Discovery Pass (yearly payment) offers benefits – free parking, activity offers, a newsletter and links to other attractions.
- Guided walks - but likely to decrease as not cost-effective.
- Commercial site partners – cycle hire, cafés etc.
- Commercial permissions for one-off events
- Venues for group and organisation activities

The FC uses a combination of internal investment and external grants.

Partnerships

- Wistland Pound. A project between the SW Lakes Trust, the FC and the Calvert Trust which provides activities for those with disabilities.
- Neroche Project. A Landscape Partnership scheme with an emphasis on access and conservation, involving the removal of conifers to encourage heathland. A local stakeholder group and independent trust are involved. The Herepath circular route includes horses.
- SW Rural Development Agency. Funding for off-road cycling. FC is lead partner with Bristol City and SW Lakes Trust.
 - Six hub centres – Forest of Dean, Ashton Court (Bristol City), one in Dorset, Haldon, Plym Valley and Bodmin (in conjunction with the National Trust). These provide whole cycle facilities; easy access through to more adventurous with different skills levels.
 - 4 start pedalling centres focussed around SW Lakes Trust sites e.g. Siblyback and Roadford reservoirs.
 - 14 Protected Landscapes (2 National Parks and 12 AONBs), hosted by Dartmoor National Park. Facilities and private sector businesses are being mapped. A tourism focussed website with interactive map will go live in November.



Grants for landowners

Woodland Improvement Grant – key target to expand area with public access. Budget of £220,000. Grants cover 50-80% of costs. 10-30 years access is required depending on grant size. Priority depends on other woods in the area with access. High priority to urban areas.

Woodland Management Grant

Contribution towards additional costs of providing higher quality public benefits. Public access budget is £495,000. Grants of £30/ha per annum and some capital costs. Use quality of life map to ascertain priority.



Questions and discussion

Forestry production requirement, derisory grant levels and loss of access if woodland is sold.

The FC's role is to put a certain amount of timber into the market.

Grants have seen a big uptake and a scoring system has been introduced. The subsidy the FC receives from the state is about the same as the grant scheme.

Access under CRoW is binding and is an obligation on successive owners. Leasehold woods may not be the same.

Cycling damage to trails

Surfacing of trails depends on the ground conditions. Usually 4" compacted stone. Costs 50p per metre to maintain. Only sustainable if maintenance costs are covered.

Charges for the Discovery Pass

The pass is £20. A charge is only made on 4 sites.

Forest tracks

Bikes can be taken on forest tracks but harepin bends can be a safety issue. Cycle tracks are well used and not open to horse-riders. There is zoned horse-riding at Haldon with associated horse-box parking.

Permit charges and multi-use

Horse riding is a bone of contention between the FC and the BHS. Permits usually cost £50 plus VAT per year. There are exceptions where there is free horse riding:

- Haldon (funding from Sport England)
- Cookworthy Forest (sparsely populated with no perceived conflict)
- Neroche (funding partners)

Permits raise £8,000 per annum which helps to deal with maintenance issues.

Guided walks

These were likely to be reduced. It was suggested by a LAF Chairman that organisations, such as the Ramblers, with the insurance and expertise could run these. This offer was appreciated.

Management

Active management of woodland was sought though some mature woodland was not coppiced or cleared.

Disease

Main disease concerns were phytophthora. Large areas of larch were being felled. Increasing deer populations raised conservation and welfare issues.

Acquisitions and disposals

The FC still makes small acquisitions and tries to acquire freehold to secure multiple benefits, particularly in urban fringe areas, using a mapping system which relates to population. The Woodland Trust also aims to create woodland within areas. A portfolio analysis, carried out in 2009, may be used to drive the disposals programme.

Access and internet

The FC wishes to work with public transport to compensate for the numbers of people without a car or internet.

The FC uses the internet as it is cost effective to promote its work and facilities.

Strategy

The Trees, Woodlands and Forest Strategy set key targets but is now out of date and will be replaced by a new strategy.

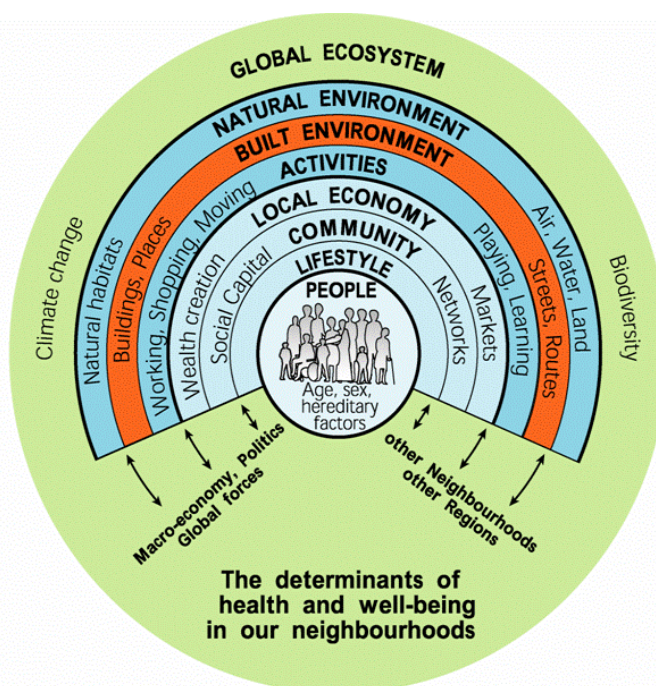
Output

The Peninsula District produces 80% of the timber from 17% of the woodland.

WORKSHOPS

Workshop 1 – Health

Led by Peter Ashcroft, SW lead for physical activity, Department of Health



Peter started the workshop with a quick and interesting quiz, aimed to find out how much participants knew about average levels of fitness in the population, which types of activity generated an increase in health and recommended levels of activity for children and adults.

A health map was produced, above, which illustrates the value of health and access and links people to lifestyle; community; the local economy; activities; the built and natural environment and the global ecosystem.

For the second part of the workshop the group was split into three smaller groups to discuss three scenarios:-

- an isolated elderly person
- a family group with low income and insufficiently active
- an educated young male with a work-hard, play-hard, drink-hard attitude

Groups had to come with ideas to the following questions:

1. What 'access product' could you devise which you think will match the interest or needs of your target audience?
2. How would you design it and who would you involve?
3. How would you market it to your target group?
4. What is the top line promotional message to your target group?
5. What is the top line promotional message to the new Public Health Service whom you may want to support it?
6. What 'outcomes' would you seek to identify in your evaluation?

It was relatively easy to come up with an access activity which might be enjoyed by the target person but the design, marketing and promotional messages were a challenging part of the activity. There was plenty to consider and some useful ideas were produced. With health improvement work coming across to local authorities this may be an area LAFs can get more involved in.

WORKSHOP 2 (a.m.) – The Mosaic Project **Led by David Rolls, Project Officer, and Alarick Greenland, Young Champion**

The Mosaic Project is an exciting project set up by the Campaign for National Parks to work with 16-25 year olds in some of the South West's most deprived communities, with an emphasis on those individuals who face barriers to accessing opportunities offered by the National Parks and YHA. David Rolls of the Mosaic Project showed a short DVD on its work to everyone. National Parks see 100m visitors a year yet only 1% are from ethnic minorities.



Those in this workshop enjoyed a pleasant walk in the grounds of Parke. At intervals the group stopped and discussed various aspects of involving young people in countryside activities, either as volunteers or as participants in a wide range of recreational pursuits. Alarick, a young champion, described his role in planning activities and getting involved with young people, encouraging them to participate.

The group saw a cycle track made up of mounds and jumps which a local group of young people had constructed themselves on land owned by the National Trust. This was set back in the woods a short distance from the former railway line path. Dealing with insurance, management, litter and participation by the young people were discussed.

Lack of young people on LAFs was a problem throughout the region. Key points for LAFs to consider were:-

- Don't re-invent the wheel – work through existing youth organisations and use modern technology

- Many young people would not find it interesting enough to be on a LAF so think about engaging them in a short term project. An excellent draft Dartmoor access leaflet written by one of the young people associated with the Mosaic Project was looked at.
- Consider whether the LAF offers something that would benefit a young person - certificated volunteering hours, CV etc.
- Think outside the box in terms of the access activities young people might enjoy – these might have a theme or involve a challenge

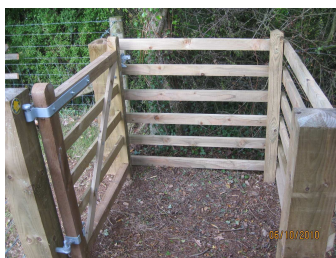
WORKSHOP 2 (p.m.) – LAF issues **Led by Colin Jones, Natural England.**

A group of 3 Chairs, 1 Vice-Chair, 2 LAF members and 4 secretaries/officers) focused on two issues, but mainly on the first.

Role of Volunteers and Stakeholders

The importance of LAFs (and all organisations interested in improving access) responding quickly and positively to the Big Society and the localism agenda was emphasised, notwithstanding some reservations individuals had about how and whether these concepts would work in practice. Several LAFs have already started looking at how they, and those they ‘represent’, can become more involved in improving ‘local access’. For example:

- Somerset LAF is developing a ‘Stakeholder Engagement Plan’, utilising a working group, following discussion at a full SLAF meeting. In Somerset up to 90% of parishes now have a Parish Paths Liaison Officer (PPLO), supported by Somerset County Council, but there may be scope for them to do more in future. Some parishes organise successful monthly working parties doing ROW maintenance.
- The Ramblers in many areas already use volunteers, (insured by Ramblers), to replace stiles etc. – but this scheme could be extended.
- In Wiltshire, a grant scheme exists (currently!) for the new Wiltshire Council to match parish contributions £ for £ to improve local access opportunities. This had proved popular.
- In some areas, (e.g. Bristol), Neighbourhood/Localism Areas were being established to further the potential of ‘local action’, which could include access.
- Bath & NE Somerset Council pays parish councils to take on some ROW maintenance tasks.
- In Devon, the Parish Paths Partnership (P3) has recruited a large number of parishes, which were given some resources (training and equipment) for routine ROW maintenance. For example, in Brixton (in the South Hams, east of Plymouth) the local P3 had replaced 30 stiles.



- In Dartmoor National Park, with the benefit of full-time professional Rangers who do lots of maintenance of ROW, plus an in-house 'conservation works team', there is less need for volunteers, but there is a team of voluntary wardens who support the work of the paid staff.
- In Torbay, there is a different model – the (independent) Torbay Coast and Countryside Trust, which was formed some years ago as an externalised 'coast and countryside service', breaking away from Torbay Council. It receives grant aid from Torbay Council and (amongst many other things) maintains ROW, but the organisation has to source many other grants to survive and develop – which may be why this model has not been followed more widely, though TCCT has been very successful in accessing grants for a wide variety of countryside projects. TCCT has had success in recruiting young people as volunteers for 9-12 month work placement schemes, offering good quality training and interesting work, skills development and an enhanced CV!
- The Cotswold AONB Volunteering Service represents another model – highly-regarded and successful, but with a price-tag - a cost of about £120,000 per year to manage.
- In some areas, the use of individuals undertaking Community Service (Community Payback) had proved useful doing ROW maintenance, but in others problematic. Success would be dependent on the interest/enjoyment in the tasks offered, and the attitude of the participants, who were not 'volunteers'.

The possible engagement of the 'commercial sector' in supporting and funding ROW provoked a lively discussion. For example, if local companies (e.g. garden centres, supermarkets) sponsor floral displays on roundabouts, why couldn't they sponsor ROW – in return for a suitable acknowledgement or advertisement? Big companies in particular are now required to demonstrate their commitment to social and community responsibility, so look for projects and causes that they can support with their money and sometimes staff time too. It was agreed that this could be a useful avenue to explore, though there were some misgivings about associating with some large companies.

General points made were

- Insurance was often mentioned as a deterrent to volunteering, but this could generally be overcome by volunteers becoming 'registered with' (and therefore covered by) organisations which routinely had their own comprehensive insurance – for example local councils (incl. parish councils) or voluntary bodies like the Ramblers.
- Training and support was vital – the effective and safe managing of them was not a 'no-cost option', and more volunteers would generally require more support costs.
- LAFs could have an important role in co-ordinating initiatives and spreading best practice – though the scale of the task would be difficult in a county the size of Devon, where the LAF could not be expected to work directly with over 400 parish councils

Future Budgets and Finance for LAFs

Some LAFs had already been informed that their budgets and/or staff support for next year would be reduced, but most were awaiting news from their appointing authority. Maintaining momentum would be a real challenge, at a time when voluntary bodies would need/want to do more (Big Society/localism etc), and many LAFs may be

required to reduce their numbers of meetings and be given less officer support. It was suggested that if LAFs were meeting only say twice a year, it would be difficult to provide any real continuity or make much impact, and the role of effective working groups and e-mail communication would become vital. It was agreed that LAFs would need to embrace change – whether desirable or not – and try urgently to find better and smarter ways of working in readiness for the more challenging times ahead.

WORKSHOP 3 – Green Infrastructure

Led by Naomi Wright, Natural England, Senior Specialist in community engagement. Responsible for coordinating work on green infrastructure and environmental equality for people in the South West region.

Green Infrastructure (GI) is a strategically planned and delivered network of high quality green spaces and other environmental features. It should be designed and managed as a multifunctional resource capable of delivering a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits for local communities. Green Infrastructure includes parks, open spaces, playing fields, woodlands, allotments and private gardens



Contributing to policy and delivery of Green Infrastructure

1. What do LAF members think GI is about?

- Healthy people
- Biodiversity
- Walking
- Local greenspace
- Woodlands
- Countryside
- Living with archaeology
- Waterways
- Coastal access
- Cycle paths
- Parks
- Fresh air and fun
- Energy production
- Access
- Green issues in suburbs
- Recreation
- Improvements
- Local food

- Countryside in the town
- Impacts on environment
- Connections – green corridors etc

2. LAF highlights – Green Infrastructure experience or influence

- Enjoyment of being outside
- Experiencing contrasting weather
- Achieving the Exe Cycle route
- Whiteleigh meadow access improvements (Devon CAF advice)
- Getting a new dog and walking more as a result
- Teaching adults and families to read maps
- Led ramblers walks and festival walks
- Commented on footpath diversion
- Improved access around Chew Valley lake
- Cleared restricted byway
- Fed the birds and had strong words with the cat
- Installed 3 stile kits
- Walked the Tamar trails
- Green corridors and allotments included in the district's core strategy
- Attended LAF meetings
- Influenced improved skyline walks of Bath
- Recorded footpaths
- Written three books for walkers
- Instigation of partnership orchard restoration project
- Snowball fight combined with walk at Neroche

Policy and Strategy

Discussions were held that highlighted:

- each County and Unitary were on different time frames with regard to key policy and strategy documents. Some had differing structures. The LAF response had to reflect this.
- LAFs had different levels of resource and capacity. They met between 2 and 6 times per year.
- that most LAFs were already responding to Local Strategic Documents
- that LAFs (and Natural England) need to keep up the pressure for better joined up thinking.

The group agreed that the top strategies to influence and respond to were:

- Core Strategy and resulting Local Development Framework documents
- Green Infrastructure Strategy/Delivery Plan
- Local Transport Plans (3)
- Health Strategies

There was a plea for integrated and holistic approaches and that it was impossible to respond to the plethora of strategies being developed locally and nationally. It was

agreed that more emphasis needed to be made on the local documents but in a strategic way. There was not time within the LAF to get involved in individual cases.

LTPs (3) were most important as they released resource for green transport options, both cheaper and more effective. – see report by Adrian Davis, NHS Bristol, Research report 5 March 2010.

Evidence

Evidence to give clear facts and figures will make responses easier to pull together, and influencing more powerful.

Recommended latest summary of evidence

- <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/newsrele.nsf/WebNewsReleases/9DA5059BD7A3918D802577BC0050B34E>
- Lots of evidence on www.GINSW.org.uk
- Standards for Green Infrastructure – Access to Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGST) within a document called nature nearby.
<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/enjoying/places/greenspace/naturenearby.aspx>

Direct Delivery

Most LAFs did not see their role in direct delivery of improved green infrastructure. But many LAF members already volunteer in other capacities to improve routes, manage green spaces, are volunteer leaders etc. This means there is a lot of experience within LAFs that needs to be recognised in terms of community engagement or action, parish and town led schemes etc.

FEEDBACK SESSION

There was a brief feedback on the workshops.

Colin Jones, Natural England, gave an update on the situation in Natural England:

- Natural England to be retained but with changes to reflect reduced budget and staff numbers
- Natural England adjusting to its future place and operation. Likely 30% staff reduction
- Clearer message about priorities – the natural environment and biodiversity will be priorities
- Natural England to be proactive in facilitating change and exploring delivery by private sector, voluntary and community sector
- New management structure with new divisions
- Meetings to take place with key stakeholders
- LAFs should see themselves as part of 'Big Society' and localism with their balanced approach and membership.
- Natural England has few statutory responsibilities for LAFs – receipt of annual reports, holding of list of secretaries and consulting LAFs
- LAFs should let NE know what is important to retain in the field of access and recreation.