

NCAF

Minutes of the 21st meeting of the National Countryside Access Forum (NCAF) held on Monday 14th November at 100 Temple Street, Bristol

Present

Members:

Pam Warhurst (Chair), Countryside Agency (CA)
Henry Aubrey-Fletcher, Country Land & Business Association (CLA)
Jo Burgon, National Trust (NT)
Fiona Howie, National Farmers Union (NFU)
John Lees, Moorland Association
Iain McMorrin, British Mountaineering Council (BMC)
Ian Mercer (independent)
Trevor Mose, Local Government Association (LGA)
David Moxon, Cyclists Touring Club (CTC)
Paul Owen, Central Council for Physical Recreation (CCPR)
Jerry Pearlman, Ramblers' Association (RA)
Tim Stevens, Central Council for Physical Recreation (CCPR)
Stephanie Wheeler, British Horse Society (BHS)
Gwyn Williams, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

Observers:

Graham Bathe, English Nature (EN)
Chris Marsh, Environment Agency (EA)
Richard Brooks, Defence Estates (MOD)
Roger Smith, Defra
Heloise Tierney, Defra

Guests:

Alun Morgan, Chairman of the Joint Local Access Forum (JLAF)
Chris Hogg, Secretary to the Joint Local Access Forum (JLAF)

Countryside Agency staff in attendance:

Jeremy Worth, Charlotte Bellamy (Secretary), Jacqui Stearn, Wendy Thompson,
David Gear, Lucy Heath, Abigail Townsend

(Approx 10 members of the public attended this meeting)

1. Chair's introduction

JW welcomed everyone on behalf of Pam to the meeting and gave apologies for PW's flight being delayed. As a result, the agenda was altered slightly. He welcomed new members Trevor Mose from Local Government Association, David Moxon from Cyclists Touring Club, John Lees from the Moorland Association and Fiona Howie from the National Farmers Union. The new secretary for NCAF, Charlotte Bellamy, was also welcomed. JW welcomed Joanna Davidson-Watts from English Nature,

Richard Brooks from Defence Estates and Chris Marsh from the Environment Agency as substitute forum members. It was also recognised that a number of representatives were in the audience from the Countryside Agency.

2. Apologies for absence were received from Caroline Bedell (CLA), Charlotte Edward (CCPR), Peter Kendell (NFU), Andrew Sutcliffe (Moorland Association), Anthony Curtis (Defence Estates), Bob Lowe (Countryside Council for Wales), Chris Probert (Forestry Commission), Sarah Tunnicliffe (English Heritage), Mark Wrightham (Scottish Natural Heritage), William Crookshank (Environment Agency) and Bob Cartwright (Lake District NP)

JW outlined target dates for delivery of papers and minutes to members for NCAF. These were; papers to members prior to the meeting – minimum of one week prior to the event, and minutes to members and onto the internet following the event – within a month.

3. NCAF 21/2 Diversity Review Action Plan

Main points made in addition to the presentation made by Jacqui Stearn (CA)

- CA has been asked by Defra to develop this review, which was set out in Rural White paper 2000.
- It has long been known that many key groups are under- represented in the countryside.
- Key findings of this research are: there is a desire from groups to access the benefits of outdoor recreation; there is a lack of information and confidence as a result of lack of engagement by the sector; and transport is a challenge.
- Those asked in the research had not been to the countryside before.
- We should be aware that the perception of those groups investigated may not be the same as those who already utilise the countryside for outdoor recreation
- Organisations providing access to the countryside are split in our sector. There are groups that are resource orientated and perceive increase in visitors as harmful, and consider that any increase in visitors must be managed within the existing numbers they have. Then there are organisations who welcome and actively encourage a new diversity of visitors.
- Research recommendations were outlined, leading to tools that could be developed.

The presentation concluded with the following questions put to the NCAF:

- Are the tools that have been outlined the right kind?
- How can you and your organisation take this agenda forward?
- What training & guidance do you need?

Main points made in discussion

- Organisations need to address this difficult but important subject and should not do so simply because it is considered politically correct.

- It will take time to change attitudes amongst currently excluded groups and build awareness of the benefits of outdoor recreation. A champion should be developed to get the general public to take this on board.
- The lottery funding route is a potential resource to move this agenda forward.
- Partnership working will be important.
- There is a need to develop access land to include urban fringes.
- There is a need to start influencing from children upwards.
- There is a need to alter the culture of organisations and clubs offering the opportunities for activities. Could this be managed by developing grant award conditions?
- There is a need to make the countryside a location to do things that you may do elsewhere.
- Project evaluation is important. Arguing something has worked in the past is a valuable tool. We need effective research and project criteria.
- Access to access – how to get there is critical.
- There is a need to talk about everyone, not just Black and Ethnic minorities, but also the young & disabled. However, we should consider how rural communities can become more comfortable with ethnic members in their communities.
- Could the Black Environment Network be utilised to develop the project? JS confirmed that they were engaged with the project.
- ROWIPs could be a key way of making sure the diversity issue is addressed.
- It was suggested that there was a statement missing in the document ‘what ethnic minorities actually want’. Did the focus groups actually ask for access to the countryside? Jacqui responded that a number of pieces of research had demonstrated that there was the interest.
- CTC is doing work on the issue of disability and cycling.

JW concluded the discussion – NCAF agreed that:

- It is clear that we need to keep gathering information, so we understand people’s aspirations.
- The role of information is very important
- Access-to-access is important.
- We must be careful to set realistic timescales
- Lottery funding should be developed.

Jacqui also gave a short presentation on 'By all reasonable means' a document recently published by the CA regarding access to open spaces by disabled people. The document is available on the CA website.

Pam took over chairing the meeting at this point.

4. Minutes of the 20th Meeting (23rd March 2005)

Item 11-'future agenda items'

JP suggested that there should be a paper on coastal access. He was not suggesting however, that he had planned to prepare the paper. He would be happy however, to be involved in the preparation of a future paper. When a paper is prepared JP will be consulted for his input.

The minutes were agreed to be a correct record

5. NCAF 21/1 Matters arising from the 20th Meeting

Effects of PROW usage on biodiversity – there is a meeting on Wednesday to discuss this.

6. NCAF 21/3 Enjoying the outdoors – A recreational strategy for Natural England

Main points made in addition to the powerpoint presentation made by Wendy Thompson

- The draft-overarching objective for Natural England is encouraging more people to enjoy the natural environment more often, in a sustainable way.
- The key areas of new work are: Marketing outdoor recreation as a product; the health connection and the learning connection; developing 'outdoors on line' and other forms of information; supply of places for outdoor recreation; and planning & transport.
- This strategy will implement Natural England's statutory purpose to promote access to countryside & open spaces, encourage open-air recreation, and secure the provision of facilities.
- The brief for this research was to look 20 years ahead with a closer look at the next 10 years, looking at trends in recreation.
- Discussion papers have been prepared on the subjects of demand, supply, health, planning, and impact. These papers are to be circulated via the website by Christmas.
- We need a positive brand image, and to be clearer about what constitutes 'outdoor activity'. Using the right language will be important, as will different activities for different groups.
- People want more information, and want to find it on the web. At present there is no one point of information on outdoor recreation at present.

- We live in a risk averse society, an issue which must be addressed. Guaranteed standards would help.
- There will be a Public consultation June-August 2006, with the first public focused campaign by spring 2007.

Questions to NCAF members outlined by Wendy Thompson

1. Should the strategy focus on the work of Natural England, recognising where it can work in partnership with others but setting out direction and priorities for Natural England? Or should it provide an overall public policy framework for outdoor recreation?
2. Should Natural England adopt a consumer-led approach to outdoor recreation, which involves widening appeal, and marketing recreation as a leisure product?
3. Should Natural England take direct action to encourage individuals towards healthier outdoor lifestyles? Or should it influence the health sector to do this?
4. Should Natural England take a lead role in supplying information to the public about places and activities to enjoy the outdoors?
5. Are there particular places where Natural England should focus attention on improving the quantity and quality of places for recreation?
6. Is there a continuing need for Natural England to invest in integrating conservation and recreation? Or has sufficient work been done?

Main points made in discussion

- This is a very important piece of work as the public health is rising up the agenda with ministers. The Olympics will bring health agenda even further forward.
- The Strategy team is working with Department for Education and Skills.
- Water plays an important part in outdoor recreation. The recreation team are working with Environment Agency to develop links.
- We live in a risk averse society. There needs to be pressure on the government to allow people to do adventurous & risky activities. Experiences and adventure opportunities allow people to get out into the countryside.
- Health & safety issues are reducing spontaneity of use of the outdoors. The litigation issue needs to be addressed, this may require a change in the law to change things.
- DFES – could there be a swap over of members on forums?
- There is a voluntary project called ‘real world learning’. RSPB, National Trust and Field Studies Council are heading it and are trying to break down litigation fears held by those controlling children’s outdoor activities.
- There is a need to be careful about ‘packaging’.
- The LGA was questioned over whether local government approach to corporate insurance & litigation was limiting recreation opportunities. Trevor Mose to take the question back to colleagues.

- Activity sports need to be available in the outdoors to encourage participation in the countryside. There needs to be more exiting involvement in the countryside.
- Consumers are mentioned in the strategy. However, private landowner involvement also needs addressing to develop opportunities.
- There is a need to develop the outdoors into every day lives, and make PROW network accessible for all to use.
- We need to get a balance between demand and supply for the outdoor experience, and need to consider where the cost of outdoor recreation falls. How can we get commercial spending? We need to convince government and Treasury that this is an area worth spending money on.
- This strategy should have two parts to it, (1) Natural England getting its new strategy together, and (2) a wider framework for external use with partners.
- Action – Wendy to send presentation and her questions asked to NCAF secretary for wider distribution. NCAF members to email comments back to Wendy Thompson

7. Presentation by Alun Morgan of the Joint Local Access Forum

Alun Morgan of the Joint Local Access Forum, representing Bath & North East Somerset, South Gloucestershire & Bristol City, was invited to give a presentation on the LAF and its role. He outlined information about the LAF, the roles it had tackled, what he believed to be the LAFs main achievements, and areas where the LAF felt it could be more involved.

- Prior to the invite to this NCAF meeting Alun Morgan was unaware of NCAF and its role.
- The LAF has an excellent level of liaison with its associated authorities by inviting Rights of Way officers and Council representatives, who are regarded as full members at the meetings.
- JLAF have prepared documents including a summary of the CROW act 2000, a summary of current law related to PROW and a detailed glossary of terms used which have been utilised by numerous other LAFs around the country. They are available on the JLAF website.

Positive issues that the JLAF has tackled to date include:

- Access land. A sub committee was set up to tackle related issues such as. access to the mapped land, publicity, signage, and cooperation with landowners were tackled
- Responding to Defra paper on diversions around SSSIs
- Commented on the Local Transport Plan (LTP) for Avon and the local ROWIP.
- Definitive map project progress has been considered

- Bath & North East Somerset (BANES) recommendations for horse riders use of some cycle tracks.
- Cycle maps produced by area

Negative issues that the JLAF identified

- They were not consulted on gating order regulations that would affect Bristol & Bath.
- Problems inflicted on landowners by the government not telling landowners about individual areas of land mapped for access.
- Only just attain a full membership. Concerns when members due for re-election.
- Recent regional LAF conference in the southwest was valued. Decisions made there by members included the suggestions; a need for a single point of contact for LAFs in government; a single point/website for the attainment of PROW and access policy information; and that publicity regarding access should be more positive. It was also suggested that more LAF members should attend NCAF meetings and vice versa.
- The JLAF would like to become more involved in advising on policy and feels that its secretarial capabilities and communications abilities would allow this.

8. NCAF 21/4 Recommendations to LAFs

David Gear outlined the research factors leading to a successful LAF and barriers to success, and the main results from the research.

- There are no arrangements in place for monitoring of LAFs although they are statutory.
- LAFs produce annual report, but these tend to be promotional rather than in depth.
- Many LAFs are uncertain about their role.
- The consultants looked at existing information on LAFs, prepared a questionnaire, and completed case studies.
- The LAF Action Plan (Annex A to this paper) is a set of recommendations. These are not set in concrete, therefore, NCAF are being asked for their input.

Main points made in discussion

- We need to focus our attention on the recommendations that may be attained within this action plan.
- There is a need for consistent support to members such as templates and membership packs.
- Local authority representation and PROW officers at meetings were suggested as valuable, as are secretaries dedicated to LAFs.

- Re Action 6 – The local LAF is always invited to NCAF. All LAF secretaries are informed of the NCAF meetings and their LAF members have an open invitation to attend as members of the public. For information - NAF has a Welsh LAF rep on its forum.
- Re action 6 – NCAF members should attend regional and national LAF meetings to disseminate information.
- Regional events could collectively form a national event.
- LAFs are not sure what NCAF is or does.
- LAFs can spend time looking at issues then are not listened to by authorities.
- If LAF membership covers a balanced representation of interests, then members will pick up on outside issues and introduce them as agenda items, which can then be followed up by the LAF.
- Failing LAFs have a number of issues which restrict their development. It may be the appointing authority not listening, a poor chairman, or a recruitment problem amongst others. Further information can be found in the full report available on the CA website.

JW concluded:

- NCAF recommends revising the guidance for appointing authorities and how they should engage with their LAFs.
- NCAF should improve their liaison with LAFs & vice versa.
- NCAF suggests that LAF regional meetings are important, and there should be consultation on the benefits of organising a national event.
- NCAF should give a strong steer to NE that a national event could be useful.
- The aspiration versus the capacity of LAFs needs to be considered.

9. NCAF 21/5 Coastal access update

This paper was for information only, however the following points were raised by NCAF members.

- JP requested a further informative report on coastal access at the next meeting.
- IMc suggested that coastal access be as widespread and comprehensive as possible and not limited by concerns such as safety of steep ground.
- TM suggested greater priority should be given to access to coastal areas of any type rather than concentrate on a continuous route.

10. NCAF 21/6 PROW research 2005

This paper was for information.

Main points made in discussion

- There is a lack of information and lack of action on items promised many years ago.
- With increased powers under CROW, NE should start to encourage people to be more proactive.
- We should look at the issue of cross compliance and single farm payments.
- Local authorities have been requested by RPA to police cross compliance regarding PROW & environment. Could parish councils be used for policing?
- Could there be a document from NE to local authorities to stick to their statutory requirements.

Action: JW to bring paper the next NCAF meeting with proposals for moving this issue forward. Action: NCAF member to suggest 2-3 creative ways forward/solutions/obstacles to progress. These should be sent to the NCAF secretary to aid the preparation of the paper.

11. NCAF 21/7 Dogs in the countryside

At the last NCAF meeting, a request was made for a paper regarding dogs and access. This paper was for information.

Main points made in discussion

- Dog walkers are one of the biggest user groups in the countryside.
- Actual damage to livestock should be considered as a major contributor to land owners' concerns for access.
- We have a responsibility to try and get information to the regular dog owners. We need to look at where dogs come from (e.g. dog homes, vets etc) to reach all owners. The problem is there is no one representative organisation for 'dog walkers'.
- John Lees has prepared a paper for his LAF. This was circulated. Further hard copies can be attained at request from the NCAF secretary.
- We need to get rid of confusion regarding dog regulations. There are varied messages – 'dogs on short leads', 'dogs under close control' etc.
- The National Trust provides clear information on their sites, but it varies according to the specifics of the location.
- There are no clear facts or figures on dogs and access. Should we be collecting data? – There is an acknowledgement of lack of knowledge.
- English Nature has just released some work on access, dogs and the environment.
- PW requested information on the state of play in each individual organisation with relation to dogs in the countryside.

- (For information – since the NCAF meeting CA has confirmed support for a research project led by Hampshire CC to look at how dog walkers use the countryside.)

12. NCAF 21/8 General restrictions

The paper was prepared to explain Schedule 2:1 (use of access land for commercial activities). Heloise Tierney was thanked for her efforts to develop this guidance. This is Defra's interpretation, not a legal document. A number of organisations involved in outdoor education have approved the guidance note and rate its value. The paper is available on the Defra website and has been released widely.

13. NCAF 21/9 CA restrictions guidance

NCAF members were asked to note that the CA are beginning to review the statutory guidance to local authorities and that this issue will return to the Forum in the spring.

14. Future agenda items

A number of items are outstanding from the previous meeting:

Education, Lottery funding, biodiversity & rights of way. In addition, the following suggestions were made.

- DM – Cycling.
- SW – Rights of way paper that was promised by JW.
- JP – Specific proposals for the relationships between LAFs and NCAF.
- JP – Coastal access issue
- PW – Education
- I.Mc – Happy to be involved with the outdoor education paper preparation
- PO – Access to water.
- JB – Update on the NE recreational strategy
- JL – Dogs, summer fires & evening access problems.

15. Questions from the floor

Rob Cann (Ramblers Association)– In light of the need to provide and promote access and recent moves to run down unprofitable rural rail services, could it be suggested that DfT or specific rail industry representatives be invited to NCAF?

JW responded that influencing LTPs is key to developing ROWIPs. It may be possible to bring representatives to NCAF meetings if suitable.

Cath Hart (Hampshire CC)– Is it feasible for LAFs to be consulted on the NE Outdoor Recreation Strategy before the public consultation stage?

JW confirmed that this will be done via the web and through publicity.

16. Dates of the next meetings

The next NCAF meeting is to be held on 17th May 2006. The joint meeting with the National Access Forum for Wales is to be held on 21st & 22nd June 2006. Venues for these events are yet to be finalised.