

NW Regional LAF Chairs meeting – 27 November 2018

Agenda Item 7

Collaboration between LAFs – some suggestions

1. In the past Natural England has served to co-ordinate LAF activities, and where appropriate feed views into government. Now, NE has more or less disappeared from our world, starved as it is of resources (a situation which is unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future). In my view, this means that we must take more responsibility ourselves for collaboration, and strengthening the impact of LAFs.

2. At both regional and national level, issues arise which may at present be dealt with by individual LAFs, but which have wider ramifications and could be more effectively handled if there was a greater degree of collaboration. For example: Merseyside was active in addressing the problem of rail crossings, but this was something which concerned us in Cheshire East and probably others as well. In CE, we have spent a good deal of time recently on considering the impact of HS2 – and at least two other NW LAFs will be facing the same questions and seeking the same answers as the route north of Crewe is developed. Indeed, HS2 illustrates the need for national co-ordination: we have not had the opportunity to learn from the experience of LAFs in the southern sections of the route. Another aspect of the need for national collaboration relates to feed-in to government agencies and policies. We have made submissions on road safety for NMUs and changes to the Highway Code, and also on implications for countryside access in the recent agriculture bill. I cannot but think that more notice would be taken of a national, or even regional, voice than that of a single LAF. There are issues upon which LAFs need to confer and speak with a unified voice.

3. At a regional level, I think we have the capability to be more active in exchanging information and co-ordinating activities. Accepting that there are differences in structure and resources, I would suggest that our experience in Cheshire East could provide a starting point for discussion. As a Forum, we meet quarterly; that is a reasonable and practical programme, but inevitably the timing is less than ideal. For example, it would often be impossible to meet deadlines for responding to consultations; I am sure that other LAFs are in the same position. Between times, our main communication tool is e-mail. Individual members may use it to draw attention to local issues, to comment on draft documents (e.g. consultation responses) prepared by the chairman or secretary, or to produce their own drafts on their areas of special expertise (e.g. the needs of equestrians or cyclists; planning issues). Occasionally (e.g. meetings with collaborators, complex drafting of guidance for building access into neighbourhood plans) it is necessary to supplement the e-mail system with ad hoc working groups. I would guess that all this is true of other LAFs; I simply set out the bones of a system which I think could be adapted to meet regional needs.

4. Luddite though I am, I have learned that I can have a Group in my e-mail which allows me to communicate with all my members at the touch of a key; if the NW Chairs all had a similar Group (and the inclination to use it), it would facilitate communication among us. It would not be necessary (or desirable) to circulate details of strictly local issues (e.g. footpath diversions, planning applications – unless they raised wider issues of principle), and major questions would still need consideration at the Chairs meeting. But it would mean that we could communicate instantly if something of general interest arose (e.g. I only learned of Merseyside's rail crossings at one of our six-monthly meetings), and also that we could circulate draft documents of regional significance. A major issue would not be the technology, but the culture of using it – making judgments about what should usefully be shared with others. In itself I think that this relatively simple practice would strengthen the work and identity of the region.

5. The national issue is of course more problematic. I have long advocated the need for a National Association of LAFs, to provide leadership and a national voice to government. I would presume that the council, or whatever it is called, of such an association would be the regional chairs. I don't underestimate the problems. Leaving aside the very basic question of whether there would be general support for such an organisation, there are issues of structure, governance, finance and resourcing to be faced. However, these are not necessarily insuperable, and I think that the decline in NE support means that the time may be right to attempt movement on this front. As a starting point, I would suggest that the Chair of the NW Chairs write to other regional chairs sounding them out, and suggesting a meeting to discuss the possibility further. At least the region should earn some credit for trying.

6. These views are my own, born out of my perception of how things stand at present. I feel that LAFs generally do not have the impact which they should have, and I genuinely fear that, deprived of NE support, we could slide into obscurity. I am not offering a blueprint: I am making suggestions as a basis for discussion and consideration.

Bob Anderson, Cheshire East