

Thank you for your interest in the Northamptonshire Local Access Forum.

The following information will give an insight into the status, role and responsibilities of a Local Access Forum.

The Local Access Forum for Northamptonshire

The function of the local access forum (LAF) is to advise Northamptonshire County Council and any other relevant authorities and organisations, on the improvements of public access to land in the county for the purposes of open air recreation and the enjoyment of the area.

As Northamptonshire has very limited open access, the development and modernisation of the rights of way network through the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) will be the most important item for the LAF to advise upon.

The LAF also has a strategic role in advising on rights of way and wider public access to the countryside, not just through the improvement plan but also on other council agendas. Members of the LAF have the opportunity to scrutinise the activities of all bodies in the area which have a role in delivering access to the countryside and LAF's in general are seen as being the most influential initiative in the balanced management of access since the current framework was established by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949.

Status of the Local Access Forum

The Forum is a statutory advisory body established by, and responsible to, Northamptonshire County Council. Although it does not have the power to make decisions, the advice it can give will strongly influence how the authority and organisations like Natural England (the government's advisor on the natural environment) perform their executive functions in relation to access to the countryside.

The LAF operates openly and meetings are advertised in advance and available to the public. Agendas, papers and minutes of meetings are also publicly available.

Role and Responsibilities of the Forum

The LAF have the primary purpose of giving advice to the authorities and to the Countryside Agency on how to make the countryside more accessible and enjoyable for open air recreation, in ways which address social, economic and environmental interests.

It will encourage and assist the provision of access and give strategic advice on issues of particular local relevance. The forum is able to improve liaison between interest groups and to have links with other related forums.

The LAF is expected to give advice on the following topics:

- a) Improvement of the rights of way and wider access network, in particular through the statutory rights of way improvement plan
- b) Integration of the rights of way network into related strategies to maximise its social, economic and environmental potential
- c) Implementation, management and review of the statutory right of access to the countryside.
- d) Develop a constructive and inclusive approach to the improvement of recreational access to the countryside.
- e) Respect local circumstances and different interests while operating within national guidance.
- f) Provide advice on issues of principle and good practice which is consistent with national guidance.
- g) Engage in constructive debate and seek consensus wherever possible.
- h) Where consensus is not possible, make clear the nature of differing views and suggest how they might be resolved.

Improving the Rights of Way Network

Section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires authorities to prepare Rights of Way Improvement Plans which review the adequacy of their rights of way network and which propose action to secure an improved network. Statutory guidance indicates that the Improvement Plans should form part of the Northamptonshire County Council's Local Transport Plan.

The LAF gives strategic advice to the authorities on:

- a) Reviews of rights of way, including the extent to which local rights of way meet the present and likely future needs of the public.
- b) The draft Improvement Plan prior to publication.
- c) The results of public consultation on the draft Plan and any particularly significant issues which have arisen from it.
- d) The priorities for the action plans which follow from the review.
- e) Progress in implementing the action plan.

Implementation, Management and Review of the Statutory Right of Access to the Countryside

The LAF advises on and assists in the introduction, management and review of the statutory right of access to the countryside. This task varies between authorities according to the amount of open countryside and registered common land in the area covered by the LAF.

In producing maps showing registered common land and open countryside across the country (ie mountain, moorland, heath and down) Natural England will be able to:

- a) Produce guidance on procedures it will follow for mapping registered common land and open countryside.
- b) Consult widely on draft maps showing the boundaries of registered common land and open countryside.
- c) Produce provisional maps which take account of representations and advice made during consultation, for submission to the Secretary of State.
- d) On confirmation or modification by the Secretary of State, issue conclusive maps.

Members of the LAF will be able to use local knowledge and contacts to help the authority and its contractors to take full account of local information in the production of maps.

Natural England and National Park Authorities have the power to close land or to apply restrictions to the right of access, on the grounds of nature conservation or heritage, specific land management needs, danger from fire, or other danger to the public in accordance with the legislation. In relation to the application of local restrictions to access, the LAF will be asked by the agencies to:

- a) Identify any local issues that need to be taken into account in deciding how best to implement the advice received from English Nature and English Heritage, and in considering applications on land management grounds.
- b) Advise on the consistency and general approach that the Agency is taking.
- c) Help to identify best practice for the management of restrictions in the area.

It may not be possible for the government agencies to consult with the LAF on each application for local restrictions, especially when relatively short notice is given. However, they will aim to consult LAFs on applications for all extensive or longer term local restrictions to access.

Membership

Membership covers a wide cross section of local interests in the countryside and a range of expertise. The LAF should not be capable of being dominated by any single interest group, or any coalition of like interests.

For effective working and to ensure that they can provide the advice required, the LAF normally will consist of between 17 and 22 people.

New Members will be appointed according to clear criteria which are set out in the terms of reference for the LAF. All members have sufficient experience of the countryside in Northamptonshire to be able to make an informed and constructive contribution to improving access provision.

Members bring a wide range of experience, including:

- a) Recreational use, e.g. walking, cycling, riding and vehicular.
- b) Land management, e.g. tenants, landowners and occupiers and others with an interest in the land.
- c) Nature conservation, heritage, tourism, health, business, the voluntary sector and transport etc.

Before appointment, members are asked to confirm:

- a) their support for the positive purpose of the LAF;
- b) their commitment to working within the terms of reference and achieving the aims of the LAF through constructive working with other members; and
- c) that they are able to devote the necessary time to attend meetings, training and to network with a wide range of interests outside meetings.

Members are appointed for up to three years, with a maximum period of six years for any one individual, unless exceptional circumstances make it pertinent to retain the services of that member. The chairing and balance of membership will be regularly reviewed to ensure that the LAF remains relevant to the needs of the area. The reappointment process will be carried out over a period of time to ensure continuity of operation of the LAF.

Members are appointed on a voluntary basis, but will be able to claim reasonable expenses for attendance at meetings, training events and for field visits.

The Chair of the LAF may invite observers to meetings of the LAF. Observers will be allowed to participate in meetings at the invitation of the Chair. Representatives of Northamptonshire County Council and Natural England may be present as observers. Other observers may include representatives of district councils and expert staff from statutory agencies (eg English Nature, English Heritage and the Environment Agency). Observers will not be able to dominate the views and advice of the appointed members of the LAF.

Administration

Northamptonshire County Council provides a Secretary for the LAF. The Secretary will ensure that premises are available for meetings which are suitable for accommodating public attendance. The LAF will be advised by, and receive reports from, officers of the authorities.

The Secretary will:

- a) arrange and promote meetings;
- b) agree meeting agendas with the Chair and circulate agendas and papers for the meetings;
- c) help the Chair to run the LAF according to the statutory guidance;
- d) produce minutes of meetings;

- e) facilitate the provision of information to the public through a newsletter, press releases, a web-site or any combination of those means;
- f) produce a short annual report for the authorities and the Countryside Agency.

The Secretary is the link between the LAF, Natural England and neighbouring LAFs. The secretary will report, as appropriate, the views of the LAF to the Agency and to the relevant departments, committees and executives of the authorities and will report back to the LAF on any responses or action taken following their advice.

Meetings

Meetings will be public and advertised in advance. The Chair will determine the public's right to ask questions and the procedure for doing so. A record of each meeting will be made available to the public.

Reference

The Local Access Forums (England) Regulations 2002 and Guidance issued by Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in July 2002. Section 94 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 places a duty on highway authorities and National Park authorities to establish an advisory body to be known as a Local Access Forum.