

THE WAY AHEAD: A PERSONAL VIEW

As we reach the end of our fourth year we need to address what we wish to achieve, what it is practical to expect and how we can best plan our work towards these aims. At our meeting we will also need to hold elections for Chairman and Vice Chairman and renew allocations of members to working parties/sub groups.

The view was expressed at our last meeting “that we had achieved nothing” which has been said many times before. “Members have busy lives in other fields and do not want to just be part of a talking shop providing a veneer of consultation to the work of the County Council.”

Personally I feel we have made more progress than we sometimes think but acknowledge that many of you have a sense of frustration, shared by the officers, at our inability to progress towards ambitious national targets, which does of course come down to resources.

The whole way LAFs operate nationally is under review and there is a move to involve them in more case specific work which does give a more immediate feedback and sense of achievement.

In the meantime I have discussed matters with numerous officers at LCC including the head of legal services and have suggested some steps (a number of which have already been introduced) which can make our meetings more relevant and more effective. I have to say that at times I find myself having to be sharp, almost to the point of rudeness, to try and get through our over long agenda and we do need to find ways to reduce the time pressures we work under.

As your present Chairman there are several recommendations I would like to put to you and a number of questions which need addressing and I am circulating this to give you time for consideration. It will appear on our next agenda for brief discussion but I would wish to allow time for us to assess how the changes we have already made impact on matters before any lengthy debate on the subject so will suggest it be allocated more time for full debate at our first meeting in the New Year.

1. We should restrict ourselves to six meetings a year but alternate meetings could be preceded by informal workshops, training sessions, brain-storming of single issues or site visits. Effectively we would meet at 6.00 at County Hall three times a year and between these we should meet at 2.00 or possibly 4.00 either on site or at County Hall to be followed by the formal meeting at 6.00.

We must plan the proper use of this time; we never have time to complete our business at evening meetings so some items should perhaps be deferred to an afternoon workshop.

I do not want longer meetings for the sake of them and these early starts must only be held when there is something constructive that can best be dealt with in such a way. We might perhaps have such an afternoon session at our next meeting to discuss our way ahead and possibly arrangements for the seminar we hope to stage.

Assuming that we are to agree on six meetings a year, might I suggest these dates for your consideration? Tue Feb 5th, Wed Apr 2nd, Thur June 12th, Tues Aug 12th, Wed Oct 1st, Thur Dec 11th

Please bring your diaries to the next meeting

2. The actual agenda needs to be more focused. The Chair and Officers have started meeting two weeks in advance of any meeting, to agree its agenda. This is the second time this has happened and I hope we are seeing the benefit of this.

We need to find ways of progressing matters between meetings and this may require some additional officer support for research and correspondence. At present Sam Weston will produce letters for me to sign as agreed at meetings and takes our minutes and actually issues our agenda

but perhaps he or some other officer needs to be more of an administrator to our needs. Eddie McWilliam is our formal Secretary and does some work between meetings but already has a full time position with the LCC.

It has also been said that given much of what we decide requires action by the RofW team, our secretariat should come from another area of LCC so that they “are not responding to themselves”. Defra guidelines did suggest that we write formally to RofW when we decide issues rather than just rely on dual role officers being aware. This way our comments are on record not just within our minutes and we should receive formal replies. This may be over bureaucratic but the underlying conflicts that this is trying to address are very real, perhaps more so in other LAFs than our own. The officers however do not see any need to go down this route.

3. Agenda items need to be more relevant. This means not getting bogged down with matters we can do little to effect. A process of providing information through written reports between meetings could remove those items which we only need to note. All consultation documents should be sent out more or less when received so that individual members can respond if they wish. If any officer or member feels that any such document is worthy of discussion in full meeting, they can request it be on the agenda. The Chair and Officer(s) meeting to agree the agenda can then decide whether to include it or not.

This will entail probably two and possibly three mailings between each forum meeting. The minutes should go out two weeks after the meeting together with any correspondence which has come in and two weeks before our meeting the agenda should go out with any further paperwork. Mid cycle any further correspondence / reports could be posted out if thought urgent or requiring study.

The issue of formal consultation documents from the Government is more difficult in that there is often an expectation from Government that the Forum will be involved and be asked for a view in its own right as statutory consultee. Sometimes these reports are not of great interest to individual forum members but have such importance that they need to be brought to the Forum to encourage members to engage in the issues. It is not easy to meaningfully debate such matters as a large group and it may be that if time permits a smaller number of members be delegated to respond. Ideally such matters could be dealt with during the afternoons of our extended meetings but deadlines for response are often too imminent to permit this.

4. We need to address whether the right mix of officers attend our meetings. We work closely with the rights of way team but should we also ensure that at most meetings there is also a representative from planning and transportation and possibly also from legal services? Both departments have a substantial input on the issues we address but time constraints make it difficult for them to be represented unless there is something specific on the agenda which involves their area of expertise.
5. Presentations. We need to cut down the number of presentations. Much of what is often said in such circumstances is going over ground that members already know and takes up unnecessary time; invariably questions elicit more meaningful information. Officers doing any presentation could try and avoid going over old ground just because we have some new members; such members could be briefed in advance. Preferably all presentations by officers or members should be in the form of a paper sent out in advance with questions taken on the night. However if any member does raise an agenda item I would expect them to come to the meeting prepared with necessary material to support their case. All agenda items must be requested three weeks prior to the meeting if we are to decide whether it can be fitted into the agenda or whether it can be covered outside of the meeting.
6. Sub-groups. Some members feel the sub groups have not proved very effective despite their best endeavours. Feed back is essential as has been previously discussed, if those participating are not to feel they are wasting their time. It is not realistic for these groups to be other than officer led as meeting without the relevant officer would just lead to communication delays. However the officers do need to give higher priority to ensuring that such groups have a proper programme working to an identifiable aim preferably with a finite timescale. The Publicity sub group is now working well and this is in no small part due to the efforts of Andrew Poole, the officer who is driving it.

It has long been a difficulty for the Forum that we have no designated budget and do not therefore know what we can spend. Having said this we would rather the money was spent on acquiring new rights of way to improve the network than on our own activities and the ideas above will make some savings not least because we will not need to meet more often. Such budget as the Forum can employ should be used to improve our profile with both members and officers of the LCC, with District and Parish Councils, and with the public at large. We cannot represent the views of people who do not know we exist nor can we advise authorities who are not aware of our role.

Newsletters should be of better quality and more attractive. One should incorporate our annual report without all the boring minutes and agendas etc and the other could be a mid-term report. Depending on how our first such effort is received it may well be a good idea to issue the annual report in conjunction with some form of high profile conference or public meeting.

I trust this gives you all food for thought and addresses the concerns a number of you have raised with me.

Despite the frustrations please keep up the good work. Whilst it may not seem so at times, our forum is more effective than many.

Having now completed four years as your Chair I will fully understand if you now feel the need for a change but if you wish to have me continue for another year I am happy to offer my services to you.

RJD Nov 2007