

Joint Local Access Forum

for the City of Bristol, Bath & North East Somerset and South Gloucestershire



JLAF HEALTH COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting held on 24 January 2018 at the Community Room, Keynsham Library

PRESENT

Mark O'Sullivan (JLAF Chair)
John Darvill
Rennie Dickins
Donald MacIntyre (JLAF Vice-Chair)
Ann Fay

APOLOGIES

Cllr Michael Bell (South Gloucestershire)
Cllr Kathy Thomas (Peasdown St John)

MINUTES

1 It was agreed that this initial meeting of the Committee be chaired by Mark O'Sullivan. He welcomed members of the Committee, and introduced its work.

Background

2 The meeting of the JLAF on 3 November 2017 had discussed its work plan for 2018/19. It had agreed that there was a risk that its effectiveness might be diminished by having too low a profile to exercise influence, and by being perceived by the Appointing Authorities as a waste of, rather than as a welcome addition to, their resources. Yet the fact was that the JLAF was appointed because its members had special expertise in this area which was not as widely shared as might be thought. It had real benefits to contribute but they needed to be visible, and it would be important for the JLAF to be seen to be more active in addressing the priorities of the public at large and the Appointing Authorities in particular.

3 It had been agreed that among the areas which deserved a higher focus was the contribution which the JLAF could make to improvements in public health as a result of better outdoor exercise, and that it should set up a committee to advise it on such matters. This was the first meeting of that group.

Scientific evidence on health issues

4 A great deal of evidence on the relationship between health and the outdoors was becoming available, affecting mental and what might be termed spiritual as well as physical health; Ann Fay remarked that the burden of evidence was becoming undeniable. The Chair had circulated before the meeting a persuasive 50-page report by the Institute for European Environmental Policy on *The Health and*

The JLAF: improving outdoor recreation and sustainable travel



Social Benefits of Nature and Biodiversity Protection. Rennie Dickins drew attention to a report in *The Times* of 24 January 2018 of work by Professor Carol Jagger at Newcastle University seeking to put a value on the health benefits of exercise, and forecasting a reduction over the coming years in the proportion of people aged over 85 and free of serious disease from 9% to less than 1%. John Darvill drew attention to the often very practical suggestions of the *iWork* report recently commissioned by Bristol City Council – along with its sometimes alarming statistics on the actual state of health and wellbeing.

Encouragements and barriers to outdoor exercise

5 There was discussion of factors inhibiting the use of footpaths. Keith Weller, a JLAF member, had drawn attention to shallow stiles which were often intimidating to older walkers, a problem endorsed by John Darvill. And a farmer remarked that landowners would often use neglect of stiles or mud, or the presence of bulls, as a deliberate way of deterring footpath use. The current programme of replacing stiles with kissing gates, as resources permitted, was quite significant in making countryside rights of way less intimidating, more attractive and better used. Education was important too, if walkers were, for example, to be aware of how differently one should treat one's dog in a field of sheep compared with a field of cattle.

6 Again, network impacts needed to be borne in mind: too many footpaths ended at a narrow road down which it was dangerous to walk or cycle because of speeding motor traffic, and new short stretches of footpath could be invaluable in such cases. Nor should urban footpaths be ignored: in development projects, for example, footpaths should be designed to offer walkers attractive views, to avoid laborious detours, and to afford easy passage of both cyclists and pedestrians at once.

7 Rights of Way Improvement Plans needed to take account of the Government's recently-announced 25 Year Environment Plan, which insists that development should always offer environmental net gain. Such plans needed to be ambitious: they should as their name indicates be seen as opportunities to maximise improvement, not to minimise harm. Donald MacIntyre believed that the likely reshaping of agrienvironment payment schemes would provide some additional funding for such purposes.

Health walks

8 Ann Fay and Mark O'Sullivan, with contributions from others, reported briefly on the large number of organised walks badged as health walks across the West of England, in addition to the more demanding walking programmes organised by the Ramblers Association and by the Cotswolds Conservation Board through its Wardens. The *Walking for Health* programme by the Ramblers and Macmillan Nursing sought to draw much of this together, but was far from comprehensive. And both Bristol and South Gloucestershire put a coherent effort into organised walks especially for health. Kathy Thomas, a member of the Committee who had



been obliged to send apologies to this meeting, was seeking to pull together a reasonably comprehensive list of groups which arranged organised walks.

9 John Darvill highlighted evidence that only 40% of people over 65 did more than one 10-minute walk a month, and argued that it was not the longer walks which were the problem: it was the short, edge-of-town walks which were likely to bring the best returns for effort. Donald MacIntyre emphasised the importance of not confining consideration to walkers, remarking that, on his farm on the Bath fringe, walkers were only about a third of those using the public rights of way, the remainder being divided more or less evenly between runners and cyclists – both of whom were actually getting more vigorous exercise than the walkers. Ann Fay confirmed that horse-riding and care of horses was at least as effective in exercise terms as walking. It was agreed that the role of the JLAF, however, was to advise the local authorities rather than the public directly.

Responsible bodies

10 Mark O’Sullivan outlined briefly the role and composition of the Health and Wellbeing Boards set up in 2008, and reminded the Committee that public health services had transferred in 2013 from the NHS to local authorities; it was in these fields that guidance from the JLAF might be most useful. Initially the organisational changes had been accompanied by additional funds for public health, but that had stopped, and Rennie Dickins confirmed that rights of way and other relevant budgets such as parks had suffered progressive cuts since about 2010.

11 Precise roles and responsibilities, however, differed somewhat between the West of England authorities. So far, the JLAF Chair had had a very positive reception in Bath and North East Somerset, and a reasonably encouraging one from Bristol City, although it had proved more difficult to get a hearing at South Gloucestershire and it was particularly unfortunate that a South Gloucestershire councillor who had hoped to attend the present meeting had in the event been obliged by other commitments to be elsewhere instead.

Conclusions

12 The Committee concluded that the next step would be for it to prepare a short and attractive report to the Appointing Authorities, and in particular their Health and Wellbeing Boards.

13 The Committee recommended to the JLAF that it be constituted with the following Terms of Reference:

To advise the JLAF on:

- Current views on the relationship between outdoor exercise and health/well-being;
- The priorities of public services in the JLAF’s area relating to outdoor exercise and health;
- What motivates people to take outdoor exercise which may be beneficial to their health or well-being;

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- How the JLAF may assist public services concerned with health through the improvement of non-motorised access to the countryside and travel on urban routes.

14 Mark O’Sullivan retired from the chair of the Committee, and Rennie Dickins was elected as interim Chair, to be succeeded substantively by John Darvill at the next meeting, which would be held in the early summer, at a date and in a location to be arranged. All members of the Committee would submit to Rennie Dickins over the next few weeks a contribution towards the report to be sent to the Health and Wellbeing Boards.

Support

15 It was still the case that the Appointing Authorities, despite a statutory obligation to provide reasonable administrative support for the JLAF’s work, had refused to support the Committee. The JLAF Chair continued to seek to resolve this problem.