

FOOT AND MOUTH LESSONS LEARNED INQUIRY

Note of meeting

Date: 17 May 2002
Location: YHA, Matlock

Present: Roger Clarke – Youth Hostels Association
Sue Cassell – Youth Hostels Association

Jane Mardell, Inquiry Secretariat
Sue Wilson, Inquiry Secretariat

1. Jane Mardell thanked Roger Clarke for his submission and explained the processes of the Inquiry. The following points were made in discussion:
2. The Youth Hostels Association (YHA) had received a lot of interest from the media during the outbreak. The high level of national press coverage of their situation had helped them put their position across. The YHA have 300,000 members and many of them had been active in helping raise the organisation's profile. At a political level, they had had a good hearing from different Ministers but felt that, throughout the crisis, tourism had come second to agricultural needs. The YHA had attended a meeting, chaired by the Prime Minister at Downing Street at the beginning of March which had led on to the creation of the Rural Task Force.
3. The Government had set the balance too much in favour of farming at the start of the process and then spent months trying to retrieve the situation. The creation of Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) had helped but the role of the Secretary of State at Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) had been marginal and the YHA were not convinced that, if there was another such outbreak, the value of the countryside as a recreational resource would get sufficient weight. DEFRA now had four main objectives. They should have an additional recreational objective, instead of linking recreation to rural jobs. Part of their role should be to help the nation see the countryside as a resource for everyone to enjoy. The biggest lesson from the FMD outbreak should have been recognition of the economic importance of countryside recreation. The impact of the outbreak was far greater on the non-farming community than on the farmers themselves. Whilst non-farming issues should be given greater importance, responsibility for tourism should not be sited within DEFRA.
4. In any future outbreak, the Government should take the lead but should create a structure (such as the Task Force) representing a balance of different interests and all stakeholders should be at the table as well as farmers. The tourism sector was not always properly represented and there was no outside body representing tourism interests. It would not be

possible to set up such an organisation as the National Farmers Union (NFU) for tourism as it would not represent all sectors, such as ramblers and hikers.

5. The crisis had highlighted the economic importance of tourism in the countryside. Walking in the countryside had previously been viewed as a marginal activity and of no economic significance. However, even though farmers had not benefited directly from the industry, hotels and shops had and many others had lost their livelihoods.
6. The Rural Task Force had been too heavily weighted towards farming institutions but had been a valuable forum where stakeholders could meet during the crisis. The YHA had had a route into it through DEFRA and DCMS officials. They had also had an input to the Rural White Paper.
7. On footpath closures, as soon as the Government announced that the countryside was closed, the YHA knew immediately that this would cause enormous problems. It would have been better to announce that grazing land with livestock in infected areas was closed. The National Trust and the Ramblers Association had also encouraged their members to stay away from the countryside. The National Trust had tried to persuade the YHA, against its wishes, to close hostels on National Trust properties. The National Trust had closed all rural properties without thinking of the economic consequences.
8. Giving local authorities power to close rights of way and then not revoking that power was a mistake. The lesson to be learned was to be very careful about the messages given out and be more selective. If public access was to be restricted, it should be on a proportionate basis. Blanket closures of rights of way as, during the outbreak, proved catastrophic.
9. Asked whether they had any thoughts about preparatory work that could be done in "peacetime", the YHA said it was important to establish whether closure of footpaths was necessary at all. The Government should look at the economic cost of closing rights of way versus the economic costs of the risk of people spreading the disease. If it was then felt that restrictions were necessary, telling people that routes through infected areas were closed would be better than blanket closures.
10. On communications, later on in the outbreak, the Countryside Agency website had improved and given information about access to the countryside. The internet was the best way of communicating and this was the first crisis that had been managed by e-mail and the web. In the early stages of the outbreak, there had been confusion about the MAFF helpline but local newspapers had been a helpful source of information.
11. On leadership during the crisis, the announcement from the Prime Minister that the countryside was open when really it was not open at all had proved very frustrating. This was a mixed message that had not helped.

There was an important need for accurate information and announcements.

12. Asked whether they felt that they had yet felt the full economic impact of the outbreak, the YHA said that it has an annual turnover of £30m. The gross effect of the outbreak was an income loss of £5-6m, net £3-4m. They had managed to save some money by laying off 300 seasonal staff but the major consequence of the outbreak was that they were now having to sell 10 hostels. It was better to do that now, in order to fund investment in modernisation of other hostels. The impact of FMD was continuing to be felt because of the time being spent this year in closing the hostels. However, it was too early in the season to tell whether this year would be a good year but they did not feel that people have been put off visiting the countryside.
13. There had been some positive spin-offs as a result of the crisis – for example, the YHA had received more political attention and a higher media profile. It had also caused them to think more deeply about where the organisation was and where they wanted to be in the future. They had begun to work more closely with other outdoor organisations such as those representing ramblers and cyclists. However, the YHA's links to the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) and NFU were not strong.
14. The impact of the outbreak on numbers of overseas visitors was muddled up with the events of 11 September. Overseas visitors accounted for a third of the YHA's business and consisted mostly of young backpackers visiting urban hostels.
15. On compensation, the Government had announced that it would match the money raised by charities affected by FMD but this had only applied to farming charities. Therefore, the YHA had not been eligible. The Government had also announced compensation in the form of business recovery funds but, again, the YHA had been ineligible because they were not a business. They felt that their greatest success had been in persuading the Government that each unit (hostel) was a small business and they were then able to get grants. The process was variable region by region and, once the Government had agreed they were eligible, it had taken time to get the message across to the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). Therefore, the Government needed to give clearer information on eligibility for such packages. Also, although the timescales for applications to be submitted and the time allowed for money to be spent were short there was a need to focus on moving forward. The Countryside Agency also gave money to help the YHA's recovery. Together the reinvestment funds had totalled £1.5m. The Government should look creatively at re-investment programmes to help organisations move forward after such a crisis.
16. The YHA felt that the main lessons to be learned from the FMD outbreak were:

- Recreation in the countryside is a huge economic resource to the nation (far more than farming). During the outbreak, the balance was wrong and this should be redressed in future;
- The closure of the countryside was a big mistake and should never be repeated;
- The closure of rights of way should never happen again;
- The Government should look again at DEFRA's objectives. They should have a free-standing objective about helping people to enjoy the countryside;
- The Government should think early and imaginatively about setting up re-investment schemes;
- Educational activity about visiting towns and countryside should be strengthened and the YHA and other organisations could play a part in this.

FMD Inquiry Secretariat
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