

Cabinet

Report Title:	Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report 2023/24
Meeting Date:	10 September 2024
Lead Councillor(s):	Councillor Paul West, Cabinet Member for Ipswich, Operational Highways and Flooding
Local Councillor(s):	All Councillors
Director:	Andrew Cook, Executive Director of Growth, Highways and Infrastructure
Assistant Director or Head of Service:	Steve Palfrey, Assistant Director, Waste and Environment
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Brief summary of report

- The local access forum is a statutory stakeholder body which advises on improving access to the countryside. It is required to submit an annual report of its activities and the appointing authority (the County Council) must publish that report. The report details the forum's activities and highlights its priorities and recommendations.

Members of The Suffolk Local Access Forum are volunteers with a wide range of skills, knowledge, and experiences in countryside access. In addition, one County Councillor and one District Councillor sit on the forum.

This is the forum's twenty-first Annual Report, and it summarises their activities between August 2023 and July 2024.

What is Cabinet being asked to decide?

- The Cabinet is being asked to accept the Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report 2023/24 and address the report's recommendations and state the actions that the Council is taking to address those recommendations.

Reason for recommendation

- Under the Local Access Forums (England) Regulations 2007, local access forums are required to submit an annual report to their appointing authority with guidance stating: "We would expect the authority to respond positively to the forum's annual report and to say what actions they have taken on the advice and recommendations of the forum."

What are the key issues to consider?

4. The key issues are as follows:

a) Suffolk's Energy Schemes:

The forum fully recognises the importance of developing sustainable options for energy production in the UK and supports Suffolk County Council's ambitions to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. However, the forum is concerned with the seeming lack of coordination between schemes, especially on the Suffolk coast with its numerous conservation and environmental designations, and its extensive green access network. With the recent lifting of the embargo on onshore wind generation schemes, and likely increase in other energy related Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects, this is likely to be a persistent theme.

Response: The County Council recognises concerns over the numerous projects and the key role Suffolk plays nationally and will work to ensure appropriate mitigation for green access is integral to all proposals.

b) Improving Suffolk's Green Access network:

The forum welcomes new green access initiatives including the delivery of a new bridleway link between Bury St Edmunds and Horringer, the potential of a new National Trail for Suffolk in the King Charles III England Coast Path, and the opening of the public open space at Griffin Wharf in Ipswich. The forum also sees the creation of more off-road walking and cycling routes, funded through development and other external sources, will help support national policies to encourage and promote walking and cycling.

Response: The County Council recognises the value of such initiatives and the benefits they bring to Suffolk's communities and will endeavour to continue to deliver such projects in line with the Suffolk Green Access Strategy 2020-2030.

c) Severance of Suffolk's Green Access network:

The forum continues to be concerned over any road or rail schemes which may impact negatively on the green access network and will continue to work with the county council to ensure networks are improved as a result of these schemes.

Response: The County Council supports improved access networks which relate to road and rail schemes and when the council is leading on major road schemes will endeavour to always consult the forum.

How does this relate to the County Council objectives?

5. This report is linked to the Council's objectives indicated below:

Promoting and supporting the health and wellbeing of all people in Suffolk	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Strengthening our local economy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Protecting and enhancing our environment (including carbon reduction)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Providing value for money for the Suffolk taxpayer	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

How will this impact on the Council's objectives?

6. SLAFs recommendations focus on using the green access network to encourage sustainable travel choices which is relevant to reducing carbon emissions and Suffolk achieving carbon neutrality by 2030.

What are the resource and risk implications?

7. The Suffolk Local Access Forum understands pressures on public finances but highlights the importance of green access on people's physical health and mental wellbeing, its importance to the rural economy, and asks the County Council to continue its on-going support in this area.
8. The Executive Director for Growth Highways and Infrastructure will consider and discuss with the Cabinet Member for Ipswich, Operational Highways and Flooding the appropriate level of funding for the public rights of way and green access network when looking at the priorities for revenue and capital budgets.
9. An Equality Impact Assessment is not required for the SLAF Annual Report 2023-2024, as advised by Suffolk County Council's Lead for Equalities and Inclusion.

What are the timescales associated with this decision?

10. Not applicable

Alternative options

11. Cabinet could change the proposed responses from the County Council to recommendations from SLAF or suggest additional issues that it would like the forum to explore.

Who will be affected by this decision?

12. Officers acting on these recommendations and users of public rights of way, communities, and landowners within Suffolk.

Main body of report

Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report 2023/24

Administration and Meetings

13. The County Council's SCC's Rights of Way and Access team provides secretariat services and recruits new members but the forum have their own logo, letter heading, email address and website page at <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way-in-suffolk/suffolk-local-access-forum>.
14. The cost of administering the forum in 2023-24 was £1,599.54.
15. The forum met on 26 October 2023, 25 January 2024, 25 April 2024, and 25 July 2024. All meetings were open to the public
16. At meetings the forum received updates and briefings covering
 - a) Suffolk Energy Schemes
 - b) Network Rail level crossing closures

- c) King Charles III England Coast Path
 - d) New Cut West Public Open Space
 - e) National Highways Fiveways Junction Barton Mills proposals
 - f) East Suffolk Council Felixstowe Garden Neighbourhood Masterplan
 - g) Open Access seasonal closure review
 - h) Consolidation of Suffolk's Definitive Map
 - i) Legislation regarding converting footpaths to bridleways
 - j) Bridleway Creation Order consultation
 - k) Definitive Map Cut Off Date 2031
 - l) Bury St Edmunds to Horringer bridleway link
 - m) SLAF Terms of Reference
 - n) Site visits have been arranged to see issues on the ground at:
 - i) Fiveways, Barton Mills.
 - ii) North Felixstowe Garden Neighbourhood.
 - iii) Gipsy Lane level crossing and Gipping Valley Path, Needham Market.
 - iv) Cavenham Heath Open Access site.
17. The forum thanks the Rights of Way and Access team for their on-going support, advice and assistance which is vital to the forum performing their duties.

SLAF Main Activities in 2023/24

Suffolk Energy Schemes

18. During the year the forum have received detailed updates and have commented on:
- a) National Grid Sea Link (Suffolk to Kent)

In December 2023, the forum responded to National Grid's consultation on Sea Link. The forum objected to the scale of a proposed converter station, requested clarity on the alignment of cable trenches, and asked that a Public Right of Way Management Plan was published and agreed prior to construction work commencing.
 - b) Sizewell C
 - c) Sunnica
 - d) National Grid Bramford to Twinstead
 - e) Norwich to Tilbury
 - f) Scottish Power East Anglia ONE North and East Anglia TWO offshore windfarms
 - g) Scottish Power East Anglia THREE offshore windfarm
 - h) National Grid LionLink (Suffolk to Belgium)

King Charles III England Coast Path

19. In November 2023 the forum wrote to Natural England (NE) requesting an update on the delivery of the King Charles III England Coast Path in Suffolk, expressing frustration at the lack of progress, and requesting NE commit to funding implementation costs and ongoing maintenance due to delays. NE responded in December 2023 advising they had little control over timescale but had agreed to additional resources in the County Council to deliver the path.
20. The forum received advice on pedestrian access over the Orwell Bridge being part of the King Charles III England Coast Path. The forum requested assurances from the County Council that public health precautions and consultations had been made.

A11 Fiveways Junction, Barton Mills

21. In January 2024 the forum wrote to National Highways asking for a progress update on proposals to develop the A11 Fiveways junction at Barton Mills. National Highways responded the following day advising that all major road schemes under the Third Road Investment Strategy (RIS3) were awaiting guidance from the Department for Transport and would likely be considered under RIS4 which carried a timeline beyond 2030.

Horringer Bridleway 7

22. In August 2023 the forum wrote to Cllr Paul West as Cabinet Member for Ipswich, Operational Highways and Flooding, regarding Horringer Bridleway 7 to urge the County Council to bring forward capital funding to enable the construction of an all-weather surface along the route.

Griffin Wharf Public Open Space, Ipswich

23. In August 2023 the forum wrote to the County Council to press for a swift opening of the Public Open Space (POS) at Griffin Wharf in Ipswich. The forum was pleased to see the POS finally opened to the public in February 2024.

SLAF Membership

24. The forum had 17 members during the period covered by this report. Three members stood down, including David Barker who was Vice Chair and had been on the forum since its inception in 2003, and one new member joined. There are 14 members as of July 2024.

Working Groups:

25. The forum has the following working groups:

Topic	Membership
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PRoW Severance, including Network Rail and National Highways	Barry Hall, Clare Philips, Roley Wilson, Chris Bower
Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs)	Suzanne Bartlett, Barry Hall, Roley Wilson, Anthony Wright, Gordon Merfield
England Coast Path	Barry Hall, Susan Mobbs, Roley Wilson, Chris Bower
Planning and Development	Roley Wilson, Monica Pipe, Anthony Wright, Margaret Hancock, Chris Bower

Barry Hall

Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

Christopher Bower

Vice Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

August 2024

Sources of further information

The public have a right to inspect any documents included in this box – they are therefore in the public domain once the agenda is published. Background papers used in preparing the report must be kept by the report author for four years from the date of the meeting.

If there are no sources of further information, don't delete the box. Please insert the wording "No other documents have been relied on to a material extent in preparing this report".

- a) Local Access Forums:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-access-forums-participate-in-decisions-on-public-access>

- b) Suffolk Local Access Forum web pages and membership

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way-in-suffolk/suffolk-local-access-forum>

- c) Suffolk Local Access Forum meeting 26 October 2023

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/asset-library/imported/2023-10-26-SLAF-Papers.pdf>

- d) Suffolk Local Access Forum meeting 25 January 2024

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/asset-library/2024-01-25-SLAF-Agenda-and-Papers-PUBLISH.pdf>

- e) Suffolk Local Access Forum meeting 25 April 2024

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/asset-library/2024-04-25-SLAF-Agenda-and-Papers-websreite.pdf>

- f) Suffolk Local Access Forum meeting 25 July 2024

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/asset-library/2024-07-25-slaf-agenda-and-papers.pdf>

- g) The Suffolk Green Access Strategy: Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2020-2030:

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way-in-suffolk/green-access-strategy>

Suffolk Local Access Forum – Members Details

SLAF Membership August 2023 – July 2024

The forum had 17 members during the period covered by this report.

Barry Hall (Chair) – Barry is a retired local government officer with experience of working on countryside and rights of way projects. Barry retains an interest in countryside access as a member of the RSPB, Suffolk Wildlife Trust and National Trust. *Barry has been a member of SLAF since October 2007 and Chair since January 2016.*

David Barker MBE (Vice Chair – until January 2024) – With his wide experience within the NFU, CLA and as a former Countryside Agency commissioner, David seeks to balance all interests in countryside access. David was also Chair of Creating the Greenest County. *David had been a member of SLAF since its inception in July 2003 and had been Vice Chair since April 2010. David stood down from the forum in October 2023 after 20 years of service.*

Christopher Bower (Vice Chair – January 2024 onwards) – Chris is a keen cyclist who enjoys off-road hiking, biking, and running, exploring the natural environment, and participating in ultradistance cycling events. As a Cycling UK advocate, he has created a long-distance multi-terrain cycling route around Suffolk to encourage responsible green access and improve physical, mental, and environmental health. *Chris became a member of SLAF in April 2023 and took on the role of Vice Chair in January 2024.*

Suzanne Bartlett – Having been brought up on a farm near Framlingham, Suzanne spent most of her life living and working in Suffolk. Since retiring as a librarian, she has dedicated more time to walking and cycling in the countryside, whilst continuing as a self-employed writer and researcher. She is particularly concerned with promoting the benefits of outdoor activities for both physical health and mental well-being. *Suzanne has been a member of SLAF since October 2018.*

Margaret Hancock – Margaret is a Blue Badge Tourist Guide with a particular interest in promoting sustainable tourism. She is keen to encourage visitors to explore Suffolk by public transport, walking and cycling to benefit the local economy and preserve the peace and tranquillity of the county. Margaret has experience of supporting children and young people with disabilities, enabling them to access leisure facilities. *Margaret has been a member of SLAF since April 2010.*

Jane Hatton – Jane has always lived in Suffolk enjoying the countryside as both a horse rider and dog walker. Jane has a background in Sales and Marketing and has previously been the Sudbury Town Centre Manager. She works to improve access for the community into the countryside with an interest in promoting the benefits to health and tourism and has introduced new walks for both the Suffolk Walking Festival

and Walking for Health. *Jane was a member of SLAF since October 2013 and stood down in January 2024.*

Gordon Merfield – With a background in agriculture, since the 1980's Gordon has been active in participating and coaching field sports events as well as being interested in the wider countryside and walking in foreign countries. *Gordon has been a member of SLAF since September 2004.*

Susan Mobbs – Susan is a walker and a cyclist mainly because of the opportunities they give her for exploring landscape, history, and nature at close hand. She is a volunteer with the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, doing practical work on local reserves, and a member of the Long-Distance Walkers Association. Her professional background is in social care and social and community development, and she is keen to see improved access to the countryside and outdoor activities for people of all ages and abilities. *Susan has been a member of SLAF since October 2018.*

Clare Phillips – With a background in journalism, Clare has worked on the BBC's 'Farming Today' programme and presented countryside documentaries for BBC Radio Suffolk. Clare enjoys off-road running and walking in the Suffolk countryside, organises several Trail Races, and runs each year for her running club. She is a horse-rider and a Trustee of Ipswich Riding for the Disabled Group with experience of working with a wide range of riders with disabilities. Clare also chairs the footpaths sub-committee of Brantham Parish Council. *Clare has been a member of SLAF since October 2018.*

Monica Pipe – Monica farms just north of Ipswich and has many well-used footpaths on her land including the promoted long-distance trail, the Fynn Valley Walk. *Monica has been a member of SLAF since its inception in July 2003.*

Adrian Shepherd – Adrian is General Manager of National Trust Ickworth Estate. The Trust was founded on the principle of maintaining spaces for people to enjoy and benefit from, and this is what motivates Adrian in his work. In his professional capacity he is committed to making the estate more accessible to cyclists, walkers, and horse riders, and developing sustainable travel options to National Trust properties. Away from work, Adrian is a walking enthusiast. *Adrian has been a member of SLAF since April 2023.*

Councillor Joanna Spicer – Joanna has lived in Suffolk for over 50 years having come to live here in 1972 to work for the newly formed East Anglia Tourist Board as the Information Officer. She was first elected to Suffolk County Council in 1989 and represents the 16 rural villages of the Blackbourn Division, north-east of Bury St Edmunds. Joanna is not only a keen walker, but also works with parish councils and landowners to press for additional rights of way and green space to be a larger part of new developments. *Joanna has been a member of SLAF since June 2022 representing Suffolk County Council.*

Councillor Edward Thompson – Edward is the Liberal Democrat District Councillor for Martlesham and Purdis Farm. *Edward joined SLAF in July 2024, replacing Cllr Whitelock in representing District and Borough County Council's interests.*

Jim Wayman – Jim works for a company representing east Suffolk potato farmers. He has an interest in balancing the needs of landowners and farmers with maintaining the natural beauty of Suffolk's landscapes and ensuring there is access for all to enjoy the countryside for recreation. *Jim has been a member of SLAF since April 2023.*

Councillor Sarah Whitelock – Sarah is a Green Party District Councillor for Aldeburgh and Leiston and in 2016 became voluntary secretary of the Aldeburgh Business Association (ABA). She has a keen interest in renewable energy with specific concerns over proposals for Sizewell C. *Sarah joined SLAF in January 2024 replacing Cllr James Mallinder representing District and Borough Council's interests. She stood down in July 2024.*

Roley Wilson – Roley is actively involved in the promotion of the health benefits of walking for all. He has a lifelong interest in nature and open-air pursuits. During a 33-year career in the police one of his many postings involved being the Wildlife Liaison Officer for Suffolk. He is a member of the Ramblers and since retirement has spent an increasing amount of time in volunteer activities for that organisation. A keen bird watcher and member of the RSPB and Suffolk Wildlife Trust he has a passion for ensuring that everyone has free and responsible access to the countryside. *Roley has been a member of SLAF since October 2013.*

Anthony Wright – A long-term cyclist and walker, Anthony has worked with several local authorities and publishers on the production of cycling and walking guides. For 15 years before retiring Anthony worked part-time for the national sustainable transport charity Sustrans as its Area Manager for Norfolk and Suffolk, while also working part-time as a Suffolk County Council Cycling Officer. He maintains an active interest in developing cycle routes and advises the Highways Agency and Norfolk & Suffolk Highways of their responsibilities for non-motorist users' safety on the highway. *Anthony has been a member of SLAF since its inception in July 2003.*