

SUFFOLK LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

ANNUAL REPORT 2005 - 2006

Introduction

1. As required by the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2002 I have pleasure in submitting the third Annual Report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum to the County Council as the Highway Authority.
2. The Suffolk Local Access Forum (SLAF) was formed under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) in 2003. SLAF acts as an independent body to advise the County Council on matters relating to rights of way and access to the countryside. It is also a statutory consultee for the Countryside Agency on mapping of open country and plans and policies produced by a wide range of organisations.
3. It is made up from those interested in access to the countryside and rights of way including users, landowners, land managers, members of community organisations and conservation interests. The current membership is listed in Appendix B.
4. Suffolk County Council administers the Suffolk Local Access Forum, which is met from government funds provided through the Revenue Support Grant for the implementation of the requirements of the Countryside and Right of Way Act 2000.

Our Work

5. The SLAF has met five times during the past year to discuss a range of issues that have arisen from consultations, papers and reports submitted to us by amongst others, the County Council, the Countryside Agency, the Environment Agency, Highways Agency, DEFRA and the Upper Waveney Valley Project.
6. Members of the public attending our meetings have also been given the opportunity to raise or comment on issues discussed.
7. In addition members of SLAF have been invited to take part in meetings organised by the Countryside Agency on Coastal Access, Environment Agency on Estuarine Strategies, Suffolk County Council on Rights of Way Improvement Plan.
8. Main areas of work that we have been involved in are:-

The Suffolk Rights of Way Improvement Plan

9. Providing input and comment on the progress and the preparation of the County Councils' Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) continued to be a major part of all our meetings this year. Following on from the work on the ROWIP Assessment we continued to advise the County Council at various stages on the development of the ROWIP Statement of Action and supported the extensive involvement and consultation process.
10. The Forum has considered the final draft ROWIP and Action Plan and congratulates Suffolk County Council on the production of a well reasoned and realistic draft plan that properly addresses the issues and identifies the

main actions to take forward the development of Rights of Way over the next ten years to meet public needs. SLAF fully acknowledges the extensive involvement and consultation undertaken by the County Council with communities, land managers and user groups and recognises this work as a major factor in providing a well received Action Plan. The Forum supports the main objectives and actions of the plan and particularly welcomes the new approach to definitive map prioritisation, community involvement, greater involvement with land managers and the development of a definitive map for Ipswich.

11. We look forward to working with the County Council in the implementation of the plan.

Rights of Way Funding

12. Earlier this year, the Forum requested and discussed a report on the financial structure of Rights of Way, considered current funding levels for maintenance and necessary improvements of the network. The Forum continues to have concerns that base budget for revenue remains inadequate to properly maintain the network and urges the County Council to improve the level of revenue funding for rights of way.
13. The Forum recognises the financial support given by the County Council to Rights of Way for both urban and countryside access improvements through the integration of the ROWIP into the Local Transport Plan and the revenue budgets. We also congratulate the County Council on their success and recognise the need to continue to find imaginative approaches to external funding. This year has seen grants successfully obtained through Open Access Management Grant, ROWIP grant, Objective 2 Funding and the Suffolk Development Agency, providing a wide range of improvements to Open Access land and the network.

Countryside Agency Open Access

14. The 25,000 hectares of Open Access land in Suffolk was officially opened on October 31st 2005. A number of Forum members attended the regional launch held at Sutton Hoo, organised jointly between Countryside Agency and Suffolk County Council. The county has the highest level of restrictions on Open Access in England and the Forum is a statutory consultee on the making of long directions. The Forum has taken a robust but flexible approach to its decisions supporting all restrictions for a period of one year and then requiring further information following the first year of access before supporting longer term action.
15. The Forum also recognises the positive approach taken by the County Council in the introduction of Open Access and the extensive engagement with land managers, conservation and user groups. We congratulate the County Council on the successful planning and introduction of Open Access and in gaining external funding to improve access to these sites, manage restrictions, and also in the provision of interpretation, public education events and wardening of sensitive sites.

Land Manager Good Practice Guide

16. A key role of the Forum is to provide a broad base of user groups and land managers to air topics relevant to both and develop solutions.
17. This year, members of SLAF worked as part of a steering group to develop a new good practice guide for land managers. This is the first stage in improving the awareness of rights of way management and requirements with land managers, users and general public. It is intended to launch the guide in November 2006.

Consultations

18. SLAF has also been consulted on:

Coastal Access

SLAF members took part in a pilot consultation exercise about the introduction of Coastal Access held by the Countryside Agency prior to national consultation early 2007.

DEFRA proposals to improve procedures for confirming countryside recreation bylaws.

SLAF responded with a range of changes to the proposals.

Blyth Estuary Strategy

The Forum has supported the County Council in its position to seek to improve coastal access and mitigate loss of rights of way through flooding and coastal erosion.

Haughley Bends (A14) improvements

The Forum are currently in discussion with the Highways Agency to seek improved non vehicular access in the draft Haughley Bends (A14) road improvement proposals.

Presentations and Visits

19. During the year presentations were given to SLAF on:

Discover Suffolk Project and web site.

Suffolk County Council's introduction and management of Open Access.

Access to rivers by the Upper Waveney Valley Project.

The Forum also visited Dunwich Heath to gain first hand knowledge of the management of Open Access land.

Membership of SLAF

20. During the past year there have been five meetings, all of which have been well attended. The membership of SLAF is unchanged. The Chair, Annette Whybrow and Vice – Chair, Julie Craven, in accordance with the statutory guidance had to stand down after three years service. John Pearson was elected as Chair and David Barker as Vice – Chair. The Forum greatly appreciate the work that both Annette and Julie have done in developing the Forum into the success it now is and their continued participation as members.

21. Members have highlighted a need to include both the young and ethnic groups on the forum and in future work. A membership and attendance list is attached.

Looking Ahead

22. It is proposed that members should have an annual seminar/training day jointly with the Broads LAF and Norfolk LAF early in 2007. The Countryside Agency are providing a range of training seminars during the winter period. There will also be a farm visit to look at access and DEFRA higher level stewardship issues in the spring / summer 2007.

Recommendations to Suffolk County Council:

23. SLAF congratulates the County Council on the production of a well reasoned and realistic Rights of Way Improvement Plan that extensively engaged with stakeholders in its preparation and properly addresses and identifies the main actions to take forward the development of Rights of Way over the next ten years. SLAF particularly welcomes:
 - a) Greater community involvement in the management of rights of way.
 - b) Fostering of working relationships between land managers, user groups and the County Council.
 - c) The focus of Definitive Map work on dealing with changes that give the greatest public benefit and improvement of the current network.
24. That SLAF welcomes additional capital funding achieved through the Local Transport Plan and other external funding but urges the County Council to improve the level of revenue funding for Rights of Way network maintenance.
25. That the Environment Agency and Highway Authority, when considering flood defence strategies take full account of rights of way and maintain the same level of public access to and around our estuaries.

John W Pearson
Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum
August 2006

SUFFOLK LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

MEMBERS DETAILS AND ATTENDANCE

David Barker Deputy Chair– Landowner (other interests local business and conservation). With his wide experience within the NFU, CLA and as a former Countryside Agency commissioner, David seeks to work to balance all interests involved in access to the countryside. 5 meetings

Angela Brown - Equestrian riding (other interests walking and access for all). Angela has a long standing involvement in long distance riding and is a member of the Mid Suffolk Bridleways Association. In her professional capacity she is very much aware of the health benefits that stem from walking. 4 meetings

Bryan Collen – Landowner (other interests tourism and walking). Brian has been involved in many organisations including the NFU, Anglian Water, Internal Drainage Boards and the County Council's Rights of Way Liaison Committee, so he is able to appreciate other people's views. 3 meetings

Julie Craven – Walking (other interests conservation and access for all). Through her past involvement in local government and other bodies, Julie has a wide breadth of knowledge of rights of way, countryside management and conservation, access and tourism issues. 5 meetings

Linda Hoggarth – Rethink Disability chairman (other interests Access for all) Through Rethink Linda has been involved in a leisure service for disabled people providing opportunities for people to take part in activities such as bird watching, fishing, 'healthy walks'. She has also chaired the Physical and Sensory disabilities Partnership Group and the Governing body of Thomas Wolsey School. 2 meetings

Bryan Freemantle – Building Contractor (other interests horse riding) Bryan worked as county access and bridleways officer for 8 years. He also worked on a large country estate in Suffolk for 10 years and attended agricultural college. 4 meetings

Rob Lucking – Conservation (other interests landowner/manager). Although a Conservation Officer for the RSPB, Rob will bring to the Forum the views of other bodies who own and manage land for conservation with public access such as English Nature and the Suffolk Wildlife Trust. 2 meetings

Gordon Merfield - Access for all (other interests walking and cycling). With a past background in agriculture; since the 1980's Gordon has been active in participating and coaching in field sports events as well as being interested in the wider countryside and walking in foreign countries. 4 meetings

Mary Mitson-Woods – Past Chief Executive, Suffolk Association of Local Councils. Membership of the SCC Countryside Access Group which involved encouraging parish and town councils to value ROW and the hinterland countryside to their village as the most valuable recreational facility in the village. Working knowledge of the CROW Act and its impact on parish councils and landowners. 3 meetings

John W Pearson Chair – Retired Principal, Otley College. Professional qualification horticulture agri-conservation environment and business management. As principal was involved in all aspects of countryside development. Country member of NFU. Former education training director British Landscape Industry training organisation. 4 meetings

Monica Pipe – Landowner (other interest conservation). Monica farms just north of Ipswich and has many well-used footpaths on her land including the promoted Fynn Valley Walk. 3 meetings

Norman Southgate - Motorised vehicle use (other interests water based activities and walking). As Rights of Way Officer for the Suffolk Landrover Owners Club Norman keeps members aware of where they can legally go off-road. He is also a keen sailor and a member of the Copdock & Washbrook footpath maintenance working group. 5 meetings

Iain Taylor – Walking (other interests conservation and access for all). A retired Sales Office Manager, Iain is a past Chair of Suffolk and Sudbury and district Ramblers Association and belongs to the Suffolk Wildlife Trust. 5 meetings

Mike Taylor – Landowner (other interests conservation and tourism). With his Forestry Commission background, Mike will bring the experience of managing large tracts of land as a business whilst ensuring that conservation and public access are fully taken into account to the Forum. 5 meetings

Mark Timms - Walking (other interests conservation and cycling). Mark is the Project Officer for the Upper Waveney Valley Project, is a keen walker and cyclist, He works with local communities and landowners on a day to day basis on conservation and access issues. 5 meetings

Keith Turner - Conservation (other interests tourism and access for all). Through his past and current work, Keith has broad experience of balancing the needs of conservation with public access and liaising with other user and interest groups. 4 meetings

John Wayman – Landowner (other interests tourism and conservation). A former district council member farming in the Stour Valley, John feels that he now would like to contribute to a the wider rural picture. 5 meetings

Annette Whybrow – Landowner (other interest local business). A solicitor who is a former chair of the Suffolk Chamber of Commerce, Annette is involved with the CLA. 3 meetings

Anthony Wright – Cycling (other interests tourism and walking). A long-term cyclist and walker, Anthony has worked with several local authorities on the production of cycling and walking publication and works part time with the sustainable transport charity Sustrans. 5 meetings

In addition there are three local authority members;

Jane Midwood – Councillor, Suffolk County Council. 1 meeting

Phillip Dunnett – Suffolk Coastal District Council. 2 meetings

Don Levick - Forest Heath District Council. 3 meetings