

SUFFOLK LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

ANNUAL REPORT 2006 - 2007

Introduction

1. As required by the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2002 I have pleasure in submitting the fourth 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 Natural England 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 four 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, Go-East, the County Council, Natural England, Highways Agency, Ipswich Borough Council, Suffolk Coastal District Council and DEFRA.
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 and training organised by Natural England, DEFRA and Bentwaters Park Ltd. Members have also continued to work with land managers and user groups to develop a land manager/public awareness campaign.
8. Main areas of work that we have been involved in are, as follows.

Rights of Way Improvement Plan

9. Providing comment on the progress of the annual Rights of Way Action Plan, which was the outcome of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) was a major consideration this year.
10. The Forum specifically welcomed the new approaches to the Local Transport Plan, definitive map prioritisation, community involvement, land management and the protection of rights of way at risk, especially to develop a definitive map for Ipswich and has been satisfied with the progress to date. It has also been agreed to set up sub groups of the forum

to work with officers in the development of some areas of the action plan. These are:

- a) Parishes with limited access or no rights of way
 - b) Coastal Management and Coastal Access
 - c) Development of accessible routes on the urban fringe
 - d) Improvement of A12/A14 crossings
11. We congratulate officers on their continued success in finding imaginative approaches to funding through the grant aid system. This year has again seen grants successfully obtained through the Transport Asset Management Plan, Local Transport Plan, Open Access Management Grant, Objective 2 Funding and the Suffolk Development Agency providing a wide range of improvements to Open Access land and the rights of way network. Recent work encouraging developer contributions to rights of way development through s106 agreements is supported and encouraged by the Forum.
12. 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 maintenance of revenue budgets. The financial year of 2007–08 has seen in excess of £600,000 raised from external sources. The Forum continues to have concerns that base revenue budget remains inadequate to properly maintain and protect the network and provide the necessary equity to be geared up by successful grant bids.

Haughley Bends A14 Road Improvements – Public Inquiry

13. The Forum raised concerns with the Highways Agency about the lack of non-motorised user access across the proposed Tothill interchange near Stowmarket. Officers of the Highways Agency attended a forum meeting and presented their case for the proposed junction layout but were not in a position to agree a change of design. The Forum therefore sought the only route available to it and objected to the scheme and was represented at the inquiry by vice chair, David Barker MBE. The Forum recognises the support provided by officers of the county council in the production of data for the inquiry. The outcome of the objection was for the inspector to recommend a new non-motorised user audit to be undertaken and for recommendations of the audit be included in the detailed design of the scheme.

Coastal Access

14. Throughout the year officers of the county council have kept members fully up to date with the progress of the proposed Coastal Access process. This culminated in the Forum responding to the DEFRA consultation on the proposed options. The creation of new coastal access highlights a key role of facilitating local deliberation and implementation of new and improved coastal that the forum is ideally suited to carry out. SLAF would seek the county council's endorsement of the development of such a role if the currently proposed Coastal Access arrangements were implemented.

Open Access

15. The 25,000 hectares of open access land in Suffolk was officially opened on 31 October 2005. 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 term directions. The Forum has taken a robust but flexible approach to its decisions supporting all restrictions during the first year of Open Access. It required further information following the first year of access before supporting longer-term action.
16. Natural England (NE) presented their review of directions for conservation on Open Access land in Suffolk at the 18 January meeting. NE reported few problems with Open Access in Suffolk but felt it was necessary to continue to monitor use and bird disturbance annually. It had been reported by several land managers and conservation organisations that continued wardening managed by the County Council was required. SLAF endorsed this view, subsequently NE have funded a warden for the summer and autumn of 2007.

Bentwaters Park Development

17. Members were invited by Suffolk Coastal District Council to comment on provisional plans for path development in the area of the closed Bentwaters Airbase near Woodbridge. This major change to the network in the Tunstall and Rendlesham parishes may have a significant affect on public to access the countryside in this area.
18. Members recommended a range of changes to be made to the proposals and subsequently members were invited to visit the site to review the new proposals as a result of their comments. The proposals have not yet gone to order making.

Land Manager Good Practice Guide

19. 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.
20. This year members of SLAF worked as part of a steering group to develop a new good practice guide for land managers. This was launched in November 2006. Future promotion of the role of SLAF in advising land managers, parishes and the County Council is currently being planned.

Local Access Forum Advice and Funding

21. The Forum has lobbied Natural England for a source of independent funding and advice to develop its role. Currently SLAF are awaiting a definitive response from Natural England.

Consultations

22. SLAF has also been consulted on:
 - a) A14 Haughley Road Improvements
 - b) Bentwaters Park rights of way improvements
 - c) GO-EAST Consultation on the East of England Plan
 - d) Defence Estates – Open Access

- e) Right to Apply – New rights of application and appeal in connection to making changes to the public rights of way network – DEFRA
- f) Proposals to improve access to the English Coast – DEFRA

Presentations

- 23. Haven Gateway A14 study briefing
Natural England directions for conservation on Open Access
Local Transport Plan
Rights of Way Improvement Plan – Action Plan progress
British Canoe Union – river access – (cancelled)

Visits

- 24. View Higher Level Environmental Stewardship – visit to Westhorpe Lodge Farm Stowmarket .

Membership of SLAF

- 25. During the past year there have been four meetings, all of which have been well attended. Three resignations have been received and recruitment of new membership is currently underway. The terms of two district council members are complete and new district members will be recruited in the near future. Members of the forum have previously highlighted a need to include both the young and ethnic groups on the forum and in future work and this has been considered within the current recruitment process. A membership and attendance list is below.

Looking Ahead

- 26. It is intended to have a joint day with the Broads LAF and Norfolk LAF. Natural England will continue to provide a range of training seminars. The practice of making at least one site visit per year will continue in 2007 –08.
- 27. The announcement of the successful bid by Ipswich Borough Council (IBC) for unitary authority will require IBC and the County Council to consider whether they wish the Suffolk Local Access Forum to advise them both on issues relating to access to the countryside or form their own forums. SLAF consider the provision of a joint forum to be the most effective and efficient outcome.
- 28. Members welcome the opportunity to work closely with officers of the county council on:
 - a) Parishes with limited access or no rights of way
 - b) Coastal Management and Coastal Access
 - c) Development of accessible routes on the urban fringe
 - d) Improvement of A12 / A14 crossings
 - e) Community development including work with Suffolk Association of Local Councils and community groups.

Recommendations for Suffolk County Council to consider:

- 29. That SLAF recognises and welcomes the continued success of the County Council in raising external funding for the development and improvement of rights of way. At the same time it encourages the County Council to

maintain its revenue base budget for the maintenance and protection of the network.

30. In the event of the development of Coastal Access, the County Council would support SLAF in a facilitating and moderating role during the local deliberation and implementation of new access.
31. That the County Council in its future discussions with Ipswich Borough Council over unitary status, considers the provision of a joint local access forum for Ipswich and Suffolk.
32. That SLAF supports and encourages the County Council to establish a scheme for greater community involvement in countryside access and the local environment.

John W Pearson
Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum
August 2007

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. 4 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. 2 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. 2 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. 1 meeting

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. Resigned

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. 2 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. 1 meeting

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. 1 meeting

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. 4 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. 2 meetings - resigned

Mike Taylor – Landowner (other interests conservation and tourism). With his Forestry Commission background, Mike brings 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. 3 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. 4 meeting

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. 2 meetings

John Wayman – Landowner (other interests tourism and conservation). A former district council member farming in the Stour Valley, John feels that he contributes to a the wider rural picture. 3 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 1 meeting

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. 3 meetings

In addition there are three local authority members;

Jane Midwood – Councillor, Suffolk County Council. 3 meetings

Phillip Dunnett – Suffolk Coastal District Council. 0 meetings

Don Levick - Forest Heath District Council. 3 meetings - resigned