

SUFFOLK LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

ANNUAL REPORT 2008 – 2009

Introduction

1. As required by the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2002 I have pleasure in submitting the sixth Annual Report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum to Suffolk 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 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. The forum is administered by Suffolk County Council.
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.
4. Full membership for 2008/09 is listed in Appendix B.

Our Work

5. The SLAF met four times during the past year at quarterly intervals to discuss a range of issues that have arisen from consultations, papers and reports submitted to us by amongst others, the Council, Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB, Suffolk Coast Integrated Coastal Zone Management, England Access Forum, Natural England, Environment Agency and Highways Agency.
6. Members of the public attending our meetings have also been given the opportunity to raise items or comment on issues discussed.
7. In addition, members of SLAF have been invited to take part in meetings and training organised between SCC, Broads Authority and Norfolk County Council. Members continued to liaise with land managers and user groups and other agencies on improving access in Suffolk.
8. The main areas of work that SLAF has been involved in are as follows:

SLAF identity and cost

9. In response to comments following the delivery of the annual report to Cabinet in 2008, SLAF have addressed their own identity to ensure they are clearly recognisable as an independent body. This has included developing new letter heading with PO address box, an independent email address and adapting our details on the county council website.
10. The cost for servicing SLAF for 2008-2009 was approximately £4,000. This includes secretariat, officer time, other expenses including room hire, member travel expenses to attend meetings and providing a joint Suffolk, Norfolk and Broads LAF training event. To place this in context, the overall budget for Countryside Access is £1.2M.

Investment in Rights of Way

11. We congratulate officers on their continued success in seeking and finding external funding and grants. This year has again seen funds successfully obtained through the Local Transport Plan and open access management grant providing a range of improvements to the rights of way network and open access land. Continued efforts to obtain developer contributions to rights of way improvements through section 106 agreements is supported and encouraged by the forum.
12. The forum congratulates the Council in successfully getting through stage 1 in their bid to the Big Lottery 'Changing Spaces – Access to Nature' grant scheme for a community involvement initiative and offers support in stage 2 of the bid.
13. Whilst recognising the current level of investment in rights of way through the Local Transport Plan, the forum are concerned that changes to the distribution of funds do not favour urban areas at the expense of developing sustainable access in rural areas, and that the needs of pedestrians using footpaths are fully considered in allocating funds.

Rights of Way Crossing Trunk Roads – A11 dualling

14. The forum raised concerns with Gwyn Drake of the Highways Agency (HA) and communicated its views with Rt Hon Ruth Kelly MP (then Secretary of State for Transport), Rt Hon Rosie Winterton MP (then Minister of State for Transport), Richard Spring MP (Suffolk West), David Ruffley MP (Bury St Edmunds), Lord Iveagh (Elveden Estates) and the regional director of Natural England expressing concern at the lack of provision for rights of way users across the proposed dualling of the A11 between Barton Mills and Thetford.
15. SLAF also wrote to all LAFs in England and the England Access Forum to identify similar experiences in dealing with the HA and ensure the issue of non-motorised user access across trunk roads was raised at a national level.
16. The forum's position was taken up by the England Access Forum who tabled it at a full meeting. From this meeting Natural England agreed to reflect concerns in its transport and roads policy and ask the Highways Agency for more evidence of how its 'listening approach' leads to improvements. Natural England will also consider how its local teams can have clearer advice on how to deal with local highway improvements.
17. SLAF met with HA on 16th January 2009 and 3rd February 2009 with the British Horse Society, The Ramblers, Sustrans and The Waveney Right to Ride Network and identified themselves as an objector to the scheme to dual the A11 if the needs of non-motorised users were not adequately addressed in the design of the new road.
18. The forum welcomes the funding contribution by the Council to support the scheme and believes the Council should continue to use its full resources to ensure the HA adequately address the needs of non-motorised users and accommodates rights of way on either side of the A11.
19. The forum supports and encourages the work of officers in identifying rights of way crossing points on trunk roads and working with HA to improve access in locations across Suffolk.

Coastal Issues

20. The forum has been kept informed with the progress of the Marine and Coastal Access Bill, which includes provision for a Coastal Access Scheme to provide a path around the coastline of England.
21. The forum has corresponded with John Gummer MP (Suffolk Coastal) to express SLAF's position on the Environment Agency Blyth Estuary Strategy. Mr Gummer is taking an active interest and appreciates SLAF's support.
22. The forum strongly supports the Council's position on ensuring that the Coastal Access Scheme provides effective access along the coastline and continues access along river estuaries to the first permanent crossing point.
23. The forum is concerned that the needs of local communities are adequately addressed by the Environment Agency in managing coastal change.
24. The forum remains alarmed at the likely loss of significant parts of the rights of way network should the policy of limited maintenance by the Environment Agency be enacted. The forum is also concerned that additional losses will impact on visitor and local needs, as well as putting an unreasonable burden on the highway authority to re-establish access.
25. A site visit to the Blyth estuary area was held with the Environment Agency on 7th October 2008.

Open Access

26. Suffolk County Council manages 12,500 acres of open access land which has the highest level of restrictions in England. 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 restrictions on open access.
27. Natural England (NE) presented their review of directions for conservation on open access land in Suffolk at a meeting held in Cambridge on 3rd December 2008, followed by NE attending a SLAF meeting on 15th January 2009 to present to all members.
28. NE identified open access restrictions for 2009 and reported few problems with open access in Suffolk but felt it was necessary to continue to monitor use and bird disturbance annually.
29. At a recent consultation to extend restrictions at a location in the east of the county, SLAF objected to the restriction and expressed concern to NE that the least restrictive option should be applied in all cases.
30. It had been reported by several land managers and conservation organisations that a warden and monitoring, managed by the Council, was required. SLAF strongly endorses this view and congratulates the Council in their successful bid to NE's Access Management Grant Scheme to provide a warden for 2009.

Ipswich Definitive Map

31. The forum received regular updates and progress reports on preparing the Ipswich Definitive Map and on individual cases and welcome the recent publication of the map.
32. The forum looks forward to continued development of the new Ipswich Definitive Map.

Local Communities

33. The forum welcomes the development the Access Suffolk Community Involvement Scheme to enable local communities to become more actively involved in their local rights of way.
34. The forum acknowledges efforts to source additional funding through the Big Lottery 'Changing Spaces – Access to Nature' grant scheme.

Raising awareness of countryside access

35. SLAF congratulates officers in raising awareness of countryside access through the Discover Suffolk website, new walking guides, and promotion.

Other Issues

36. SLAF welcomes individual cases creating new access, such as at Onehouse, and the contribution they make to deliver the Right of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP).
37. SLAF was concerned with new planning application forms and congratulates the proactive approach the Council has taken in monitoring and improving consultation by planning authorities.
38. SLAF raised concerns over locating wind farms adjacent to public rights of way.
39. Our vice chairman David Barker wrote to Hilary Benn Secretary of State DEFRA, part of the letter urged the minister to bring greater access flexibility with Countryside Stewardship Schemes. As a result the minister asked Darren Brain of Natural England to meet with David and Andrew Woodin. A full discussion took place and it was stated 'Access only' Higher Level Stewardship Schemes are permitted.
40. SLAF welcomes the addition of information on Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) being made available to the public via the council website.
41. The Council acknowledged a complaint from a member of the public regarding membership of SLAF and whether it effectively represented interest groups. Conclusion of the review of the complaint was that SLAF membership was consistent with its purpose, that membership was appropriate and that SLAF was meeting their purpose.

Consultations

42. SLAF has been consulted on:
 - a) Dualling of A11 by Highways Agency
 - b) The Marine and Coastal Access Bill
 - c) Open Access directions by NE

- d) Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Annual Report
- e) Gating orders (Worlingham and Stowmarket)

Presentations and Training

43. SLAF has had presentations and training on:
- a) Natural England directions for conservation on Open Access
 - b) SLAF members attended a joint forum with Norfolk and Broads LAFs on 11th November 2008 to identify common issues and share best practice. The training event was organised by the Council, The Broads Authority and Norfolk County Council. Six members attended the event.
 - c) Ipswich Definitive Map
 - d) A11 dualling
 - e) Marine and Coastal Access Bill
 - f) England Access Forum
 - g) Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Annual Report
 - h) Suffolk Coast Integrated Coastal Zone Management Initiative Officer
 - i) Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Estuaries Officer
 - j) Suffolk County Council Discover Suffolk project
 - k) Suffolk County Council Access Suffolk (Community Involvement) project

Site Visits

44. Blyth Estuary site visit – A site visit with the Environment Agency was arranged on 7th October 2008 for forum members to learn more of the issues relating to coastal management and impact of coastal erosion on access. Ten members attended the visit.

Membership of SLAF

- 45. During the past year there have been four meetings, all of which were well attended.
- 46. One new member, a district council member, was appointed in August 2008.
- 47. In order to retain a balance of interests within the forum and ensure forum meetings are effective, membership was subsequently reduced from 21 members to 17.
- 48. Four members resigned at the end of their term of office in April 2009. The retiring members include Annette Whybrow (Chair 2003-2006) and Julie Craven (Vice Chair 2003-2006). A full membership and attendance list for 2008/09 is below.

Looking Ahead

49. The practice of making at least one site visit per year will continue in 2009-10 with a visit arranged to Elveden Estates on 8th October 2009 to visit the site of the A11 dualling and discuss issues surrounding access on either side of the trunk road.

50. Members welcome the opportunity to work closely with officers of the Council on:
- a) Improvements of A11/A12/A14 crossings points
 - b) Coastal management and coastal access
 - c) Planning and the Community Infrastructure Levy

Main Recommendations for Suffolk County Council to consider are:

- a) That SLAF has been an effective and balanced forum and successfully highlighted areas of concern relating to access to the countryside, as detailed below, and represents good value for money (detail in report).
- b) The forum notes the pressures on new budgets and encourages the county council to continue its investment in rights of way revenue budgets and to seek greater investment through Local Transport Plan and other funding to reflect the important healthy and community sustainability benefits of the rights of way network.
- c) The forum welcomes the Council's robust and enabling contribution to achieving the safe non-motorised user crossing with the A11 dualling at Elveden and urges the Council to ensure the underpass agreed by the Highways Agency and associated rights of way links are constructed in the accordance with agreed details.
- d) The forum notes progress on coastal access legislation and the wider discussions on coastal access. The forum urges the Council to continue to ensure coastal communities are fully involved in discussions and that access is delivered in the best interests of users and land managers.

John W Pearson
Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum
August 2009

SUFFOLK LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

Members Details

Councillor Jenny Antill – Local Authority councillor. (other interests: conservation, Open Access and walking). A retired investment banker, Jenny is now Member of Babergh District Council for Waldingfield, a largely rural ward that abuts the edge of Sudbury. Closely involved with local conservation group, Jenny is keen to protect the vulnerable green edges of the town, while encouraging the citizens of Sudbury to get out into the countryside. 3 meetings (appointed August 2008).

David Barker (Vice Chairman) – 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. 3 meetings.

Rosemary Clarke – was elected to Suffolk County Council in May 2005. She is the Assistant Portfolio Holder for Adult and Community Services, co-Chair of the Learning Disability Partnership Board and a member of Suffolk Police Authority. Rosie lives within a mile of the coast in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB. 2 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. 4 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 (resigned April 2009).

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. 3 meetings.

Barry Hall – Interests in walking, conservation and cycling. Barry is a retired local government officer with experience of working on countryside and rights of way projects. Since his retirement Barry has retained an interest in the provision and promotion of access to the Countryside, and is a member of RSPB, Suffolk Wildlife Trust and National Trust. 4 meetings.

Councillor Sandy Martin – Ipswich Borough Council Local Authority. Councillor. Sandy Martin lived in Halesworth from 1971 to 1993, and has lived in Ipswich since then. He is a keen walker and cyclist. He was elected to Suffolk County Council in 1997 and to Ipswich Borough Council in 2002, and is currently a Councillor on both Authorities. He acted as deputy to the County Portfolio Holder for Environment & Transport from 2001 to 2005, and is now Labour opposition spokesman on the environment at both Ipswich and Suffolk County Council. 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 – Chief Executive, Suffolk Association of Local Councils. Membership of the SCC Countryside Access Group which involved encouraging parish and town councils to value rights of way and the hinterland countryside of 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. 0 meetings.

John W Pearson (Chairman) – Retired Principal. Professional qualifications in horticulture, agri-conservation, environment and business management. As principal he was involved in all aspects of countryside development. Country member of NFU. Former education training director of British Landscape Industry training organisation. 3 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. 4 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 at 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. 1 meeting (resigned April 2009).

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. 1 meeting (resigned April 2009).

Kirsty Turner – Interested in conservation and the concerns of landowners and land managers. As a conservation officer with the RSPB, Kirsty has worked within nature conservation since 2002, striving to ensure that the needs of wildlife and the environment are integrated appropriately with the provision of new or increased access opportunities for people. 0 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. 4 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 and attends the County Council's Rights of Way Liaison Committee. 1 meeting (resigned April 2009).

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 publications and works part time with the sustainable transport charity Sustrans. 4 meetings.