

Committee:	Cabinet
Meeting Date:	9 September 2014
Lead Councillor/s:	Councillor Graham Newman
Local Councillor/s:	All Councillors
Director:	Mark Hardingham. Chief Fire Officer, Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service & Public Protection, Highways and Transport
Assistant Director or Head of Service:	Alan Thorndyke, Head of Highway Network Management
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Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report August 2013 – July 2014

What is the Cabinet being asked to decide?

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Cabinet is asked to accept the 2013/14 annual report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum (SLAF) and to note the report's recommendations and the action that the Council is taking to address these recommendations |
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Reason for recommendation

2. The Suffolk Local Access Forum is required by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to submit an annual report on rights of way and access matters to the Council. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs guidance states: "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?

3. The key issues raised by the Suffolk Local Access Forum 2013/14 report are as follows:

- a) **Investment** – The forum believes rights of way and countryside access are of increasing importance in delivering key objectives of the authority, including Health and Wellbeing, Most Active County and Greenest County, and would like the authority to retain appropriate levels of investment in public rights of way to maintain front line use of this service.

SCC response: the Council recognises the role that countryside access plays in providing opportunities for active lifestyles, sustainable travel options and enhancing the county's tourism offer, and will maintain appropriate levels of funding to support front line use of this service.

- b) **Network Rail** – The forum believes that the policy by Network Rail to close rights of way level crossings threatens equality of access,

potentially excluding significant sections of the population. The forum would like the authority to lobby for alternative solutions and resist replacement of level crossings with alternatives which adversely affect access.

The forum is especially concerned at Network Rail's proposal to erect a steps only footbridge to replace the level crossing at Gipsy Lane, Needham Market.

SCC response: The Council are keen to maintain effective public access for non-motorised users and will continue to work closely with Network Rail to seek the optimum solution to rights of way level crossings to the benefit of all.

- c) **Sizewell C** – The forum believes that Sizewell C should have minimal impacts on the rights of way network during construction and maximise enhancements to access as a legacy of the development. The forum would like the county council to press EDF Energy to mitigate closures of rights of way and permissive routes during construction, with suitable alternative routes provided, and seek as a legacy an access network that meets the future long-term needs of residents and visitors to the area with positive outcomes for the local economy, employment and health and wellbeing.

SCC response: The Council are committed to ensuring the development of Sizewell C benefits local communities and visitors to the area with a significantly enhanced countryside access network.

- d) The Suffolk Local Access Forum provides a cost effective statutory advisory service to the Council and other organisations by raising issues regarding public rights of way and countryside access.

SCC response: The Council acknowledges the cost-effectiveness, efficiency and important role performed by the Suffolk Local Access Forum with its focus on issues regarding countryside access in relation to health, wellbeing, sustainable travel, tourism and the rural economy.

What are the resource and risk implications?

4. The Suffolk Local Access Forum considers that the Council should maintain an effective level of funding for rights of way and access maintenance and improvement. The Director for Economy, Skills and Environment will consider and discuss with the Cabinet Member for Roads and Transport the appropriate level of Suffolk County Council funding for the public rights of way and access network in looking at the priorities for Council revenue and capital budgets, recognising the contribution to healthy and sustainable communities and the benefits to the rural economy that these can provide.

What are the timescales associated with this decision?

5. Not applicable.

Alternative options

6. Cabinet could change the responses given by Suffolk County Council to the recommendations from the Suffolk Local Access Forum, or could suggest additional issues that it would like the forum to explore over the coming year.

Who will be affected by this decision?

7. Officers acting on these recommendations and potentially users of public rights of way, land managers and communities within Suffolk.

Main body of report

Introduction

8. As required by the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2002 I have pleasure in submitting the eleventh Annual Report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum to Suffolk County Council as the highway authority.
9. 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 countryside access. It is also a statutory consultee for Natural England on mapping of open access land and plans and policies produced by a wide range of organisations.
10. The forum is made up of individuals with a keen interest in rights of way and countryside access including users, members of community organisations, those with conservation interests, landowners and land managers.
11. Full membership for 2013/14 is listed below in Appendix A.
12. Suffolk County Council's Rights of Way and Access team administers the forum.

The Work of SLAF

13. The Suffolk Local Access Forum is passionate about countryside access. Each of our members has a keen interest in developing access to the natural environment. Members represent interest in walking, cycling, horse riding, off-road driving, sport, access for the disabled, tourism, rural businesses, nature conservation, land management and land ownership. The forum works closely with Suffolk County Council and other agencies to protect and develop access for the benefit of all residents in, and visitors to, Suffolk.
14. The forum met at quarterly intervals in 2013/14 to discuss a wide range of issues that had arisen from consultations, presentations, papers, reports and site visits.
15. Members of the public are able to attend meetings and have the opportunity to raise items or comment on issues discussed or related to countryside access. Local parish councils are alerted to SLAF meetings in their area and invited to attend.

Administering SLAF

16. SLAF are an independent body with their own letter heading and PO address box, an independent email address and a dedicated page on One Suffolk; <http://publicrightsofway.onesuffolk.net/suffolk-local-access-forum>
The cost for servicing SLAF for 2013-14 was approximately £1,500. This includes secretariat services, hire of meeting rooms, site visits and member travel expenses.

Investment in Rights of Way and Countryside Access

17. The forum commend officers on their continued success in securing investment in non-motorised user (NMU) access, most recently from the Department for Transport Safer Cycling Fund of £165k towards an NMU route between Mildenhall and West Row, and £2M for a new NMU bridge over the A14 in Bury St Edmunds.
18. The forum believes rights of way and countryside access are of increasing importance in delivering key objectives of the authority. The forum believes rights of way offer a cost effective means of delivering objectives and would like the authority to retain appropriate levels of investment in public rights of way to maintain front line use of this service.
19. Following the December 2013 tidal storm surge the forum were concerned that public access to coastal rights of way had become severely affected and wrote to Peter Aldous MP, Therese Coffey MP and Tim Yeo MP to express concerns and request funding be made available for repair work. SLAF notes that funding has been made available to the Environment Agency to address the most serious breaches.

EDF Energy – Sizewell C

20. SLAF are keen that the development of Sizewell C has minimal impacts on the rights of way network but maximises enhancements as a legacy, improving off-road connectivity between Aldeburgh and Minsmere. The forum have met with, received presentations from and held site visits with EDF Energy to understand the scale and scope of the development. The forum has impressed upon EDF Energy the need to mitigate closures of rights of way and permissive routes, with suitable alternative routes provided.
21. The Forum are equally concerned that the legacy of Sizewell C provides an access network that meets the future needs of residents and visitors to the area with positive outcomes for the local economy, employment and health and wellbeing. To this end the forum are key consultees to EDF Energy and are stressing the need for routes that meet the needs of all users from less mobile to more active users.

Network Rail and Rights of Way Level Crossings

22. Amongst Local Access Forums in England, the Suffolk LAF lead on severance issues. Throughout this year, the forum has focused on addressing proposals by Network Rail to close rights of way level crossings.
23. Specifically, the forum are greatly concerned that Network Rail intend to replace a level crossing in Needham Market with a steps only footbridge. The Vice-Chair has written to David Ruffley MP, Ben Gummer MP and Dr Dan Poulter MP, Network Rail's Director of Route Asset Management, and met twice with the Cabinet Member for Roads and Transport and with Network Rail to express concerns and lobby for alternative solutions.
24. SLAF urge Suffolk County Council to continue to resist replacement of level crossings with alternatives which exclude significant sections of the population.

Other Issues

25. **Storm Surge:** Following the storm in December 2013, the forum was updated by the rights of way team on the impact of the tidal surge on access. The forum recognise the effective management of countryside access, erecting warning signs prior to the event and then closing affected rights of way in the immediate aftermath. The forum congratulates officers on the excellent work done and being done to make repairs.
26. **Public Forest Estate:** Following the work of the Independent Panel on Forestry, Defra invited the forum to participate in a workshop in May 2014 to identify pilot projects to implement some of the panel's findings. SLAF pressed that the Public Forest Estate should be managed to enhance access for all users including horse riders and cyclists, and become more cost effective by developing opportunities to generate income.
27. **Open Access:** The forum are statutory consultees to Natural England (NE) on matters relating to Open Access. In October 2012 the forum had challenged seasonal restriction on sites where ground nesting birds had not been observed. The forum were pleased that from 2013 restriction on those sites, Horn Heath and Little Heath, had been lifted.

The forum were also consultees on dedication of NE's National Nature Reserves and dedication of access rights for horse riders and cyclists. The forum were pleased that NE adopted their views on developing new circular routes at Westleton Heath and are currently assessing suggested routes at Cavenham Heath.
28. **Suffolk Walking Festival:** The forum support efforts by officers to deliver the Suffolk Walking Festival to promote countryside access and encourage use of public rights of way. The forum are very encouraged that the event has grown significantly and become established as a key Suffolk event supporting tourism and promoting physical activity.

Meetings

29. SLAF members have held meetings on:
 - a) 17 October 2013 – Elveden Village Hall;
 - b) 30 January 2014 – West Suffolk House, Bury St Edmunds;
 - c) 10 April 2014 – Walberswick Village Hall;
 - d) 17 July 2014 – Westleton Village Hall.
30. SLAF members have attended meetings:
 - a) Regional LAF Chair and Vice Chair Meeting, Cambridge – attended by David Barker, SLAF Vice Chair, to meet other LAFs to share best practice and discuss issues they are addressing and successes they have had;
 - b) Influencing the Future of Forestry, Upminster – attended by Melinda Appleby to represent SLAF interests in developing the management of the Public Forest Estate for the benefit of all users;

- c) Cavenham Heath National Nature Reserve – attended by Barry Hall to assess opportunities to develop access for higher rights, including horse riding and cycling.

Presentations

- 31. SLAF has received presentations on:
 - a) A11 Improvement Scheme – Tim Betts, Construction Manager Balfour Beatty;
 - b) Sizewell C – Tony Free, EDF Energy, Tom McGarry, EDF Energy, Alastair Kratt, LDA Design;
 - c) Suffolk Estuary Defence and Right of Way Trial – Trazar Astley-Reid, Suffolk Estuaries Officer;
 - d) Storm Surge Damage – Annette Robinson, Suffolk County Council Rights of Way East Area Manager;
 - e) Wild Anglia – Richard Powell OBE, Chair of Wild Anglia Local Nature Partnership;
 - f) Role of Regional LAF Coordinator – Michelle Gardiner, Natural England.

Consultations

- 32. SLAF has been consulted on:
 - a) Suffolk Estuary Flood Defence and Rights of Way Trial;
 - b) EDF Energy's Draft Access Principles for Sizewell C.

Site Visits

- 33. SLAF members have had site visits to:
 - a) Elveden – A11 Dualling and NMU underpass;
 - b) Walberswick – impact of December Storm Tidal Surge on public rights of way;
 - c) Sizewell – issues regarding public access during construction of Sizewell C and the legacy of development.

Membership of SLAF

- 34. Two members resigned at the end of their membership terms and 5 new members were recruited collectively representing interests in walking, health, tourism, horse riding, conservation and rural businesses. One new member subsequently resigned due to other commitments. Membership currently stands at 16 members.
- 35. A full membership list for 2013/14 in Appendix A below.

Training

- 36. 30 January 2014 – Induction for new members by Suffolk County Council Public Rights of Way Team.

Looking Ahead

37. The practice of making site visits to complement meeting agendas, meet key partners and see issues relating to access in situ will continue.
38. Priorities for SLAF over the coming year include:
 - a) **Investment in Public Rights of Way** – to see investment in the public rights of way network and countryside access to meet the needs of an increasing and ageing population and ensure that all members of society benefit from being able to visit and enjoy Suffolk's countryside.
 - b) **Sizewell C** – to continue advising the county council and EDF Energy on the impact of the development on public access, both in the immediate and the surrounding areas. To press the case for access to be maintained during the construction phase and enhanced as a long lasting legacy of the development;
 - c) **Network Rail** – to continue working with officers and Network Rail to ensure that rights of way level crossings are not closed as a first option but that careful consideration is given to alternative solutions, solutions that meet the needs of all members of society. To continue to fight for an accessible crossing at Gipsy Lane, Needham Market.

Bryan Collen

Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

David Barker

Vice Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

July 2014

Sources of Further Information

- a) Suffolk Local Access Forum web pages:
<http://publicrightsofway.onesuffolk.net/suffolk-local-access-forum/>
- b) The Suffolk Rights of Way Improvement Plan:
<http://publicrightsofway.onesuffolk.net/home/rights-of-way-improvement-plan/>

Suffolk Local Access Forum – Members Details

Bryan Collen (Chair) – Bryan has been involved in the NFU, Anglian Water, Internal Drainage Boards and the County Council's Rights of Way Liaison Committee. *Bryan has been Chair of SLAF since April 2010.*

David Barker (Vice Chairman) – With his wide experience within the NFU, CLA and as a former Countryside Agency commissioner, David seeks to work to balance all interests in countryside access. David is also Chair of Creating the Greenest County. *David has been Vice Chair of SLAF since April 2010.*

Melinda Appleby – Since childhood Melinda has had an interest in wildlife and conservation. With a degree in Rural Environmental Studies, Melinda has pursued these interests in her career with the Countryside Movement, the RSPB, NFU and at Suffolk County Council.

Annette Ellis – Annette has a lifelong interest in wildlife & landscapes. After a 'first career' in teaching, coordinating, planning and resourcing the geography curriculum in primary schools, she now works in tourism coordinating the Mid Suffolk Tourist Information Centres. *Annette became a member of SLAF in October 2013.*

Barry Hall – 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.

Margaret Hancock – Margaret is a Blue Badge Tourist Guide. A keen cyclist, Margaret is passionate about promoting sustainable tourism by encouraging walking, cycling and the use of public transport. Margaret is a volunteer for the Out and About charity, providing support for children and young people with disabilities.

Jane Hatton – A horse rider and background in Sales and Marketing, Jane set up her own company, The Organic Box, growing and supplying vegetables to both restaurants and the public. Jane is the Sudbury Town Centre Development Manager and a member of the Gainsborough Trail working group establishing a continuous walk around Sudbury. *Jane became a member of SLAF in October 2013.*

Cllr Diana Kearsley – With a keen interest in wildlife and preserving Suffolk, Diana has specific responsibilities for community issues and is also a member of the 'Development Control' committee for Mid Suffolk District Council. *Cllr Diana Kearsley became a member of SLAF in October 2013.*

Ann Langley – Ann is involved with the Pony Club, the Easton Harriers Hunt, and is a founder member of the Mid-Suffolk Bridleways Association which works to maintain and open bridleways. Ann is also a Councillor on Ashfield cum Thorpe Parish Council. *Ann stepped down from SLAF at the end of her term in April 2014.*

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.

Alan Moore – Alan is a retired Head of Regional Planning and Transport for the East of England Regional Assembly, and is now a volunteer with the Stroke Association and West Suffolk Headway. With a particular focus on access for disabled people, Alan is interested in the issue of local access and the need to ensure that it is properly and effectively provided for both urban and rural areas.

Monica Pipe – Monica farms just north of Ipswich and has many well-used footpaths on her land including the promoted Fynn Valley Walk.

Richard Powell – Richard has worked for 25 years in nature conservation. He is a member of the Ramblers Association, RSPB, National Trust and Friends of the Lake District. He believes that the health and wellbeing of the population is driven by access to the countryside. *Richard became a member of SLAF in October 2013, but stepped down in July 2014 due to other commitments.*

Norman Southgate – Rights of way officer for the Suffolk Landrover Owners Club, Norman keeps members aware of where they can legally go off-road. He is a keen sailor and member of the Copdock & Washbrook footpath maintenance working group. *Norman stepped down from SLAF at the end of his term in April 2014.*

Councillor Jane Storey – SCC Councillor for Thedwastre North, Jane's interests include walking, dog-walking, off-road driving and, being a farmer's daughter, a strong view that along with rights come responsibilities. Jane believes that we should preserve our rights of way, including byways and bridleways, but not at the expense of common sense. These are an important part of presenting Suffolk as the Greenest County, useful for getting from A to B, but also for getting people who do not normally exercise out and about at little or no expense.

Mike Taylor – With a Forestry Commission background, Mike brings experience of managing large tracts of land as a business whilst ensuring that conservation and public access are fully taken into account.

John Wayman – A former district council member farming in the Stour Valley, John now contributes to the wider rural picture.

Roley Wilson – Roley has a lifelong interest in nature and open air pursuits. During a 33-year police career 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 became a member of SLAF in October 2013.*

Anthony Wright – 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.