

Cabinet

Report Title:	Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report 2015/16
Meeting Date:	13 September 2016
Lead Councillor(s):	Councillor James Finch
Local Councillor(s):	All Councillors
Director:	Geoff Dobson Director of Resource Management
Assistant Director or Head of Service:	Alan Thorndyke, Head of Highway Network Management
Author:	Claire Parker, Green Access Manager. Telephone number: 01473 264759

Brief summary of report

- As required by the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2002 I have pleasure in submitting the thirteenth Annual Report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum to Suffolk County Council as the highway authority. 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. This report is a summary of the SLAF activities between August 2015 and July 2016.

What is Cabinet being asked to decide?

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The Cabinet is asked to accept the 2015/16 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

- 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?

- The key issues raised by the Suffolk Local Access Forum 2015/16 report are as follows:
 - Investment** – The forum believes rights of way and countryside access are of increasing importance in delivering key objectives of the authority,

including Economic growth (tourism), health and wellbeing, developing resilient communities and supporting the need to manage down demand in other service areas. Rights of way and countryside access also support the Most Active County and Greenest County agendas. The SLAF would like the authority to retain appropriate levels of investment in public rights of way to maintain front line use of this service.

Response: The Council recognises the role that countryside access plays in providing opportunities for active and healthy lifestyles and resilient communities and how this supports the Demand Management agenda. It also recognises that green access supports sustainable travel options and enhances the county's tourism offer, and will maintain appropriate levels of funding to support front line use of this service.

- b) **Network Rail (NR)** – The Suffolk LAF lead on severance issues and believe 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 latest Transport and Works Act proposals, through which NR propose to close a further 31 level crossings within Suffolk, (the vast majority of which are recorded as rights of way), has intensified this work. Throughout this year therefore, the forum has continued to focus on addressing proposals by Network Rail to close rights of way level crossings and to achieve reasonable outcomes to NR proposals.

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 impact 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.

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) **ROWIP 2** - LAFs have a duty as statutory consultees on the Highway Authority's Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP). The Suffolk ROWIP is due to be renewed by the end of 2016 and the SLAF was involved in an early consultation to support the council around setting priorities for the new plan and providing the basis for the first of the public consultations.

Response: As statutory consultees the SLAF will be heavily involved in the development of the ROWIP 2 and it is essential to ensure continued support from it throughout the development of the Suffolk ROWIP 2.

- e) **Coastal Access:** The SLAF have noted the Government's 2020 deadline for completion of the English Coast Path. Work on this has already begun in Suffolk and the SLAF is committed to ensuring that Suffolk's Coastal Trail delivers the best possible user experience. We are currently playing a

major role in consulting with national agencies including Natural England and the Environment Agency as the planning phase progresses. The SLAF intend to continue to work closely with SCC on this piece of work throughout the forthcoming year.

Response: In rolling out Coastal Access, as Highways Authority, Suffolk CC is required to work in partnership with a range of key stakeholders in particular the SLAF. We urge Cabinet to consider the important role the SLAF plays in representing local expertise and knowledge and its lobbying presence, in delivering this strategically important piece of work.

- f) **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.

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 and resilient communities, sustainable travel, tourism and the rural economy.

What are the resource and risk implications?

5. 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 Resource Management 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?

6. Not applicable.

Alternative options

7. 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?

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

Main body of report

The Work of SLAF

9. The forum continued to meet at quarterly intervals during 2015/16 to discuss a wide range of issues that had arisen from consultations, presentations, papers, reports and site visits. Meetings were as follows:

22nd October 2015 Walberswick Village Hall

28th January 2016 Victory Cricket Pavilion Bury St Edmunds

21st April 2016 SALC Claydon

21st July 2016 SALC Claydon

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.

10. Administering SLAF

The SLAF is an independent body with its 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>.

11. Suffolk County Council's Rights of Way and Access team administers the forum. The cost for servicing SLAF for 2015-16 was approximately £1,500. This includes secretariat services, hire of meeting rooms, site visits and member travel expenses. The cost has remained static for the past 7 years and is considered to be excellent value.
12. Investment in Rights of Way and Countryside Access: The forum believes rights of way and countryside access are of increasing importance in delivering key objectives of the authority including the drive towards managing demand out of other key services. 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.

13. SLAF Activities in 2015/16

a. EDF Energy: Sizewell C

This year the forum has continued to impress upon EDF Energy the need to mitigate closures of rights of way and permissive routes, with suitable alternative routes provided and ensure 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, including improving off-road connectivity between Aldeburgh and Minsmere

Specifically, this year the SLAF has received a presentation from EDF at its October 2015 meeting, providing a general update and a review of the tourism work stream. The presentation provided opportunities to discuss the impact of the substantial workforce on the local area. The Forum also identified key issues including the necessity to temporarily close the Sandlings Walk and the Coastal Path at some point during construction.

The Forum impressed the need for closer working between the Sizewell Development and the Coastal Access Path, in order to optimise opportunities around promotion, tourism and possible funding opportunities.

b. Replacing the Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2006 – 2016

Under the Countryside and Rights of Way 2000, the County Council is required to publish a new Improvement Plan. Before preparing or reviewing a rights of way improvement plan, or in making assessments related to a

rights of way improvement plan, each local highway authority must consult their local access forum and must have regard to the advice given to them by the forum. The SLAF was therefore involved in an early consultation to support the council around setting priorities for the new plan and providing the basis for the first of the public consultations. This consultation ran during the four weeks of June and received over 800 responses. The SLAF improvement plan working group continues to support the development of the new plan.

c. Network Rail and Rights of Way Level Crossings

Amongst Local Access Forum's in England, SLAF has been a leader on severance issues. Throughout this year, the forum has continued to focus on addressing proposals by Network Rail (NR) to close rights of way level crossings and to achieve reasonable outcomes to NR proposals.

Specifically, this year, and building on last year's success in securing an alternative to a steps only footbridge to replace a level crossing at Gypsy Lane in Needham Market, the SLAF continue to press for a crossing at this site which is fit for purpose, suitable throughout the seasons (flood levels) and for all users including mobility scooters, wheelchairs and pushchairs.

The latest Transport and Works Act proposals, through which NR propose to close a further 31 level crossings within Suffolk, (the vast majority of which are recorded as rights of way), has intensified this work. A SLAF working sub group has been formed to assess NR's individual crossing proposals and a response to NR's public consultation has been submitted. The SLAF supports the work done by SCC officers and continues to lobby for solutions that keep closures to a minimum and that fully address the immediate and future access needs of the county.

SLAF will continue to comment on closure proposals specified in Network Rail's county wide programme. SLAF remains concerned that risk should not be simply transferred from the rail to the council's road network.

The SLAF received a presentation on the use of the Transport and Works Act for level crossing closures in Suffolk by Network Rail at its April meeting.

d. Coastal Access

The Government has put in place additional funding to ensure completion of the English Coast Path by 2020. Natural England began work on the Suffolk Coastal path in October 2015. The SLAF continues to work closely with SCC and Natural England on this and supports the work of SCC officers in helping to secure a viable and continuous route. SLAF welcomes the opportunities presented by the formation of the England Coast Path in East Anglia to encourage tourism and enhance green access for the people of Suffolk. In June 2016 SLAF members attended a joint meeting with representatives from Norfolk and the Broads forums, which included a discussion on how an East Anglian Coast Path might be promoted and managed.

At its July 2015 meeting SLAF welcomed Graham Henderson from the Suffolk Coast Forum and discussed access around the estuaries and at its July 2016 meeting received a progress report from Natural England. The forum was pleased to see the progress being made.

e. **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 is very encouraged that the event has grown significantly, is seen as a model of best practice by other localities, and has become established as a key Suffolk event supporting tourism and promoting good health and physical activity. The forum note that this year's festival launched Suffolk's Year of Walking and that the Festival achieved its highest percentage of tickets sales to date.

f. **Suffolk Walking Strategy**

Members of the forum continue to contribute to the successful implementation of the Suffolk Walking Strategy. The forum asks that the county council take full advantage of the value of walking in the countryside in improving people's physical and mental wellbeing and the significant opportunities it offers to help manage down demand on public services.

The forum understands the importance of green access in planning, to facilitate sustainable development across the economic, environmental and health agendas. It recognises and supports the proactive and forward thinking approach towards planning by West Suffolk Councils and asks that this model be considered across the county to help deliver sustainable and healthy communities for the future.

g. **Green Access and Planning**

The forum understands the importance of green access in planning, to facilitate sustainable development across the economic, environmental and health agendas. It recognises and supports the proactive and forward thinking approach towards planning by West Suffolk Councils and asks that this model be considered across the county to help deliver sustainable and healthy communities for the future.

The SLAF received a presentation on Planning and Green Access by Senior Planning Officer Peter White from West Suffolk Councils at the April meeting

h. **Consultations**

SLAF have been consulted on

The Anglian Level Crossing Reduction Strategy.

Ipswich Docks and Upper Orwell Crossing.

Rights of Way Improvement Plan

Sizewell C

i. **Conference/Training**

SLAF members have attended the following conferences and training sessions this year.

Regional Local Access Forum Conference

National Local Access Forum Conference

The East Anglian Coastal Path Joint Local Access Forum

Suffolk Walking Festival Launch

j. **Working Groups**

In order to be able to respond more effectively to priority access areas, the forum has agreed the following working groups:

Topic	Membership
Network Rail	Barry Hall, Roley Wilson, Diana Kearsley
Sizewell C	Margaret Hancock, Anthony Wright, Roley Wilson
Open Access	Barry Hall, Gordon Merfield,
ROWIP and Suffolk Walking Strategy	Annette Ellis, Roley Wilson, Jane Hatton, Diana Kearsley, Monica Pipe
Coastal Erosion and Access	Annette Ellis, Roley Wilson, Barry Hall
Planning and Development	Jane Storey, Jane Hatton, Anthony Wright
Agri-Environment Schemes	David Barker, John Wayman

12. **Looking Ahead**

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 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 that meet the needs of all members of society. To continue to fight for an accessible crossing at Gipsy Lane, Needham Market.
- d) **England Coast Path** - to see Natural England publish proposals in 2017 that deliver viable routes for the Harwich to Shotley Gate, and Aldeburgh to Hopton-on-Sea sections.

Barry Hall

Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

David Barker

Vice Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

September 2016

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

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.

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.*

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.*

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.*

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.

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

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.

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.