

Cabinet

Report Title:	Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report 2016/17
Meeting Date:	
Lead Councillor(s):	Councillor James Finch
Local Councillor(s):	All Councillors
Director:	Aidan Dunn Director of Resource Management
Assistant Director or Head of Service:	Mark Stevens
Author:	

Brief summary of report

- As required by the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2002 I have pleasure in submitting the fourteenth 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 2016 and July 2017.

What is Cabinet being asked to decide?

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The Cabinet is asked to accept the 2016/17 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?

4. The key issues raised by the Suffolk Local Access Forum 2015/16 report are as follows:

- a) **Investment** – The forum believes rights of way and countryside access are of significant importance in contributing to the successful and sustainable delivery of the Council Priorities for 2017 -2021, specifically inclusive growth, health care and wellbeing and efficient and effective public services. Rights of way and countryside access also support the Most Active County and Greenest County agendas. The Suffolk Local Access Forum 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 new council priorities. 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 30 level crossings within Suffolk, (the vast majority of which are recorded as rights of way), has intensified this work. 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. Over the year SLAF has had a number of successful working group meetings with EDF Energy including a site visit during which concerns about impact on access have been raised. The forum would like the county council to continue 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) **Coastal Access:** The SLAF have noted the Government's 2020 deadline for completion of the English Coast Path. Natural England are scheduled to start work on the remaining Suffolk stretch later in 2017. The SLAF is committed to ensuring that Suffolk's Coastal Trail delivers the best possible user experience and intend to continue to work closely with SCC on this piece of work throughout the forthcoming year, including working with regional partners on promoting and maintaining the trail.

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.

- e) **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

9. The Work of SLAF

The forum continued to meet at quarterly intervals during 2016/17 to discuss a wide range of issues that had arisen from consultations, presentations, papers, reports and site visits. Meetings were as follows:

20th October Sutton Community Hall

26th January Brightspace Ipswich

20th April Kesgrave War Memorial Community Centre

20th July Leiston Community Centre.

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://www.suffolkpublicrightsofway.org.uk/suffolk-local-access-forum/>

11. Suffolk County Council's Rights of Way and Access team administers the forum. The cost for servicing SLAF for 2016-2017 was approximately £1500 . This includes secretariat services, hire of meeting rooms, site visits and member travel expenses. The cost has remained static for the past 8 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 Suffolk County Council priorities 2017 - 2020 of inclusive growth, health, care and wellbeing and efficient and effective public 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 2016/17

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 had a successful working group meeting with EDF Energy, produced a response outlining areas of concern including the closure of Eastbridge Road and the proposed new road, and retaining bridle and cycleways. It has also attended a site visit with EDF Energy.

b) Network Rail and Rights of Way Level Crossings

Amongst Local Access Forum's in England, SLAF has been a leader on severance issues. Once again, throughout the 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, SLAF has responded to the Suffolkwide Transport and Works Act rejecting proposals for approximately half of the closures for a variety of reasons including length of diversion. It has also responded to the Felixstowe TWA and is currently taking a positive interest in the outlined proposals.

c) 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 and will begin work on the remaining Suffolk stretch later in 2017. 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 and working group members regularly attend joint meetings with representatives from Norfolk and the Broads forums, which included a discussion on how an East Anglian Coast Path might be promoted and managed.

d) Suffolk Walking Festival

The forum supports 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 notes that the 2017 Festival was the biggest to date and successfully delivered key objectives including engaging greater

numbers of inactive people, greater numbers of children and families and selling the greatest amount of tickets to date.

e) Suffolk Walking and Cycling 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.

f) 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.

g) Consultations

SLAF has been consulted on

The Suffolk Wide Transport and Works Paper

The Felixtowe Transport and Work Paper

AONB Boundarie Review.

Sizewell C

h) 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?

i) 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	Barry Hall Anthony Wright, Roley Wilson
Forests and Woodlands	Gordon Merfield, Anthony Wright, Jane Hatton
Open Access	Barry Hall, Gordon Merfield,
ROWIP and Suffolk Walking Strategy	Roley Wilson, Jane Hatton, Diana Kearsley, Monica Pipe
Coastal Erosion and Access	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 Gypsy Lane, Needham Market.
- d) **England Coast Path** - to continue to liaise with Natural England and to contribute to the the managing and promotion of a regional coast path.

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

SLAF Membership January 2017

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.*

Margaret Hancock A Blue Badge Tourist Guide particularly interested in promoting sustainable tourism. Keen to encourage visitors to explore Suffolk by public transport, walking and cycling to benefit the local economy and preserve the peace and tranquillity of the County. Experience of supporting children and young people with disabilities, enabling them to access leisure facilities.

Jane Hatton – A horse rider since a child, Jane was born and brought up in Suffolk enjoying the countryside both as a keen horse rider and dog walker. Jane has background in Sales and Marketing and works for Intelligent Health. *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 is actively involved in the promotion of the health benefits of walking for all. He 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.

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.