

Cabinet

Report Title:	Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report 2018/19
Meeting Date:	5 November 2019
Lead Councillor(s):	Councillor Andrew Reid
Local Councillor(s):	All Councillors
Director:	Mark Ash, Executive Director of Growth Highways and Infrastructure
Assistant Director or Head of Service:	Mark Stevens, Assistant Director Operational Highways
Author:	David Falk, Green Access Manager

Brief summary of report

1. It is a requirement of the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2002 to submit an Annual Report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum (SLAF) to the highway authority. This is the sixteenth SLAF Annual Report to be presented to Suffolk County Council. SLAF is an independent body that advises 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 SLAF activities between July 2018 and August 2019.

What is Cabinet being asked to decide?

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. The Cabinet is asked to accept the 2018/19 Annual Report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum 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

3. SLAF 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 the Department 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 2018/19 report are as follows:

- a) **Investment:** The forum stress that rights of way and access offer a highly efficient and low cost service and delivers value for money schemes. However, the service receives significantly lower funding relative to some other neighbouring counties and the forum considers that the Council should provide more effective levels of funding for rights of way and access maintenance, improvement and promotion.

Response: The Council recognises the contribution the green access network makes to healthy and sustainable communities and the benefits to the rural economy. The Council will endeavour to maintain appropriate levels of funding to rights of way and access to support front line use of this service.

- b) **Sizewell C:** The forum are concerned over the disruption long construction will have on the public rights of way network and promoted routes in a very popular area for walking, cycling and riding. The forum are concerned over conclusions EDF are making on the current and future use of the rights of way network and their proposals for changes to the network. The forum expects a legacy of Sizewell C to be a positive green access network and are requesting any closed routes during construction to be re-instated, any new routes built to a high standard, permissive routes formalised as public rights of way and significant funding contributions made to develop and maintain the green access network.

Response: The Council recognises the impact Sizewell C will have in many areas and supports the forum's request that any development manages the green access network effectively and efficiently and leaves a strong legacy for green access in the wider area.

- c) **Network Rail:** SLAF have noted difficulties delivering the Trimley Transport and Works Act Order (TWAo) but welcome the improved dialogue and working practices between Network Rail and the highway authority in early discussion on implementing the county-wide TWAo. The forum are keen to see positive conclusions for the public on the county-wide TWAo and the Gipsy Lane public inquiries.

Response: The Council welcome SLAFs involvement in the public inquiries and their support to challenge proposed closures of rights of way crossings of the rail network and gain an enhance green access network.

- d) **Rights of Way Improvement Plan "Suffolk Green Access Strategy":** The forum sees great importance in protecting and maintaining the public rights of way network and enhancing green access to meet the needs of all users. As such, the forum welcome the new ROWIP and support the aims and objectives to improve access on the rights of way network, open access sites, permissive routes, and cycle tracks.

Response: The Council thank the forum for their strong role in developing the new ROWIP and support the development of Suffolk first Green Access Strategy.

What are the resource and risk implications?

5. The Suffolk Local Access Forum recognises that there are severe budget pressures for the Council and understands that rights of way and access are experiencing budget constraints.

However, the forum stress that rights of way and access offer a highly efficient and low cost service and delivers value for money schemes yet receives significantly lower funding relative to neighbouring counties. Rights of way and access has a significant impact on sustainable travel options, the local rural and tourism economy, and on the health and wellbeing of communities across Suffolk. The forum considers that the Council should provide more effective levels of funding for rights of way and access maintenance, improvement and promotion.

The Executive Director for Growth Highways and Infrastructure will consider and discuss with the Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Rural Affairs 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.

An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is not required for the SLAF Annual Report, as advised by Lead for Equalities and Inclusion.

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 met at quarterly intervals as follows:

- 25th October 2018 – The Pykerrell Inn, Ixworth
- 24th January 2019 – Suffolk Association of Local Councils, Claydon
- 25th April 2019 – Mildenhall Cricket Club, Mildenhall
- 25th July 2019 – The Riverside Centre, Stratford St Andrew

Meetings are open to members of the public who exercise the right to raise items or comment on the issues discussed or related to countryside access. Members of the public have been present at 3 of the 4 meetings.

Four new members were recruited to SLAF and attended their first meeting on 25th October 2018. One member stepped down in May 2019. A full list of members is in Appendix A.

10. Administering SLAF

SLAF is an independent body with its own letter heading, an independent email address and a dedicated page on the Suffolk Public Rights of Way One Suffolk website; <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 of administering SLAF during 2018-19 was approximately £1,500. This includes secretariat services, hire of meeting rooms, site visits and expenses, member's travel expenses and the recruitment of new members to the forum.

12. SLAF Activities in 2018/19

a) Sizewell C

SLAF have been involved in Stage 3 and more recently Stage 4 Consultations on Sizewell C proposals. The forum are specifically interested in public access and the disruption that the long construction phase will have on public rights of way and promoted routes in the area.

The forum are concerned over changes to the road network and the impact increased road traffic will have on the rights of way network and they seek assurances that any new road crossings are safely designed.

The forum are also concerned over the impact proposed diversions and closures of rights of way rail crossings of the East Suffolk Line will have, and question conclusions EDF are making on current and future use of the rights of way network.

The forum have questioned EDF about sustainable travel modes by their workforce during construction and have asked them to create a network of cycle routes that all can use.

The forum expects clear communication from EDF during construction. SLAF have real concerns over the disruption to the rights of way network and closures of rights of way which will lead to lengthy detours for walking, cycling and horse riding. The forum have also questioned how coastal access and the England Coast Path will be maintained during this period.

The forum expects a legacy of Sizewell C to be a better green access network. The forum are requesting any closed routes during construction to be re-instated, any new routes built to a high standard, permissive routes formalised as public rights of way and significant funding contributions made to the future maintenance and improvement of the green access network.

b) Network Rail

SLAF have noted difficulties delivering the Trimley Transport and Works Act Order (TWAo) but welcome the improved dialogue and working practices between Network Rail and the highway authority in early discussion on implementing the county-wide TWAo. The forum are keen to see positive conclusions for the public on the county-wide TWAo and the Gypsy Lane public inquiries

The forum were due to participate in the public inquiry on Needham Market public footpath 6, Gypsy Lane on 4th June 2019, which on day 1 was postponed to 24th September 2019.

c) Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) – Suffolk Green Access Strategy

SLAF were heavily involved in developing Suffolk first ROWIP “In Step With Suffolk” which was published in 2006. The forum has been closely involved in the development of Suffolk’s second ROWIP, titled “Suffolk Green Access Strategy”.

The forum welcome the new ROWIP and support the aims and objectives to improve access on the rights of way network, open access sites, permissive routes, and cycle tracks.

The forum sees great importance in protecting and maintaining the public rights of way network and enhancing green access to meet the needs of all users. The forum are very concerned that budget pressures across the Council may impact disproportionate on the rights of way and access service to the detriment of green access and community’s health and wellbeing.

d) The Agricultural Bill

SLAF discussed opportunities under the Agricultural Bill to emphasise the importance of public rights of way and green access for the health and

wellbeing of communities and for the local economy in a post-Brexit UK. The forum's Vice Chairman met with an MP and the DEFRA Minister to emphasise these points and raise issues with the end of Stewardship Schemes. He subsequently wrote to all Suffolk MPs and members of the House of Lords to emphasise the importance of permissive access in complementing public rights of access across Suffolk.

Lord Gardiner and Jo Churchill MP both responded and acknowledged the benefits of the natural environment to people's health, and the opportunities for the agricultural system to deliver wider benefits.

e) The England Coast Path

SLAF are keen to see the England Coast Path delivered in Suffolk and to see enhanced access along Suffolk's coastline. SLAF also want a continuous route, with no gaps at estuaries nor a reliance on ferry services which could be seasonal or subject to last minute cancellations.

The forum wrote to Natural England to express this concern and press the point that the path will be an asset for Suffolk. The forum emphasised that access along all of Suffolk's estuaries to the first permanent crossing point will ensure a continuous route, allow easier access to public transport links, and enable access to overnight accommodation and refreshment opportunities, thus boosting the local tourism economy.

f) Walberswick Bailey Bridge

SLAF welcome the speed at which the Council were able to re-open the Bailey Bridge after inspectors advised closure, but note the repairs are temporary and the full refurbishment will be expensive.

g) 2019 Suffolk Walking Festival

SLAF congratulate officers in delivering the 12th annual Suffolk Walking Festival, now established as one of the largest and longest running walking festivals on Britain.

The forum were impressed with the scale and impact of the event which had an estimated economic impact of over £218,000 on Suffolk's economy, delivered 123 walks and events across the county, attracted over 2,000 participants and draws overnight tourists into Suffolk.

The forum are pleased to see that the event is a pan-Suffolk partnership of all authorities, many community volunteers and has assistance from health organisations, conservation bodies and organisations, drawing in expertise, sponsorship and support from across the county.

h) SLAF Recruitment and Working Groups

Membership of a local access forum can vary between 10 and 22. At the start of this period SLAF had 11 members triggering a recruitment process

by SCC officers. The recruitment process resulted in 5 interviews and 4 appointments. The new appointees bring strong experience of tourism, long distance walking associations, disabilities, horse riding and sports, broadening the breadth of knowledge and skills within the forum.

SLAF also set up 7 working groups to address issues that arise between meetings where more in-depth discussions are required or where timelier responses are needed.

In addition, SLAF gained representation on the East Suffolk Line Rail Community Partnership.

i) Presentations

1. 25th October 2018 – Sizewell C, presented by EDF.
2. 25th July 2019 – Stage 4 Consultation Sizewell C, presented by EDF.

j) Consultations

1. Sizewell C Stage 3 Consultation
2. Elveden Estate/SSSI Heathland Restoration Project

k) Training

1. 25th April 2019 – Induction and refresher training for all members on rights of way and access, Mildenhall, delivered by rights of way and access team.

l) Conferences and Meetings

1. 16th January 2019 – Local Access Forum Regional Meeting, Cambridge, attended by David Barker.
2. 4th March 2019 – East Suffolk Line Community Rail Partnership, attended by Margaret Hancock representing SLAF on the East Suffolk Lines Community Rail Partnership, South Group (Ipswich-Darsham).
3. 4th June 2019 – Network Rail Public Inquiry on proposed closure of Gipsy Lane footpath level crossing, attended by Barry Hall.
4. 10th July 2019 – Local Access Forum Regional Meeting, Peterborough, attended by Barry Hall and David Barker.

m) Working Groups:

The forum has 7 working groups who meet in-between meetings to discuss key issues, address tight deadlines or attend other meetings:

Topic	Membership
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Network Rail	Barry Hall, Clare Philips, Roley Wilson, Margaret Hancock
Sizewell C	Suzanne Bartlett, Barry Hall, Roley Wilson, Anthony Wright
Open Access	Barry Hall, Gordon Merfield
ROWIP	Derek Blake, Jane Hatton, Monica Pipe, Roley Wilson
Coastal Erosion and Access	Barry Hall, Roley Wilson, Susan Mobbs
Planning and Development	Jane Hatton, Jane Storey, Anthony Wright
Agri-Environment Access 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 a level of investment that ensures the public rights of way network meets the needs of its users.
- b. **Sizewell C** – to contribute to stage 4 consultation and press for a high quality, long-lasting legacy from the development.
- c. **Network Rail** – to attend public inquiries to represent the needs of users to ensure the rights of way network provides effective sustainable travel options and easy access to the countryside.
- d. **Rights of Way Improvement Plan** – to see the publication of the ROWIP and support its aims and objectives.
- e. **Development** – to gain awareness by the planning process and identify opportunities for the forum to influence design of new developments.
- f. **The England Coast Path** – to see progress of the delivery of a new coastal path with effective access along Suffolk's estuaries.

Barry Hall

Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

David Barker

Vice Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

September 2019

Sources of further information

- a) Suffolk Local Access Forum web pages:
<http://www.suffolkpublicrightsofway.org.uk/suffolk-local-access-forum/>
- b) The Suffolk Rights of Way Improvement Plan:
<http://www.suffolkpublicrightsofway.org.uk/home/rights-of-way-improvement-plan/>
- c) Local Access Forums:
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-access-forums-participate-in-decisions-on-public-access>

Suffolk Local Access Forum – Members Details

SLAF Membership October 2019

The forum had up to 15 members during the period covered by this report. Four new members were recruited at the start of the period with one member stepping down. The period of this report ends with 14 members. (*LAFs can have between 10 and 22 members*).

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. *Barry has been a member of SLAF since October 2007 and Chair since January 2016.*

David Barker MBE (Vice Chair) – 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 was also Chair of Creating the Greenest County. *David has been a member of SLAF since July 2003 and Vice Chair since April 2010.*

Suzanne Bartlett – Having been brought up on a farm near Framlingham, Suzanne has spent most of her life living and working in Suffolk. Since retiring from her profession as a Librarian, she has dedicated more time to walking and cycling in the countryside, whilst continuing as a self-employed writer and researcher. She is particularly concerned with promoting the benefits of outdoor activities for both physical health and mental well-being. *Suzanne has been a member of SLAF since October 2018.*

Derek Blake MBE – Chairman of Clare Walkers and the Activity Planning Trustee at Clare Castle Country Park, Derek has a keen interest in all aspects of leisure walking, as well as issues related to access, health & well-being and tourism. *Derek has been a member of SLAF since October 2018.*

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. *Margaret has been a member of SLAF since April 2010.*

Jane Hatton – Jane was born and has always lived in Suffolk enjoying the countryside as both a horse rider and dog walker. Jane has a background in Sales and Marketing and has previously been the Sudbury Town Centre Manager. She continues to work to improve access for the community into the countryside with an interest in promoting the benefits to health and tourism. She has introduced new walks for both the Suffolk

Walking Festival and Walking for Health. *Jane has been a member of SLAF since 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 has been a member of SLAF since October 2013 and stepped down in May 2019.*

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. *Gordon has been a member of SLAF since September 2004.*

Susan Mobbs - Sue is a walker and a cyclist mainly because of the opportunities they give for exploring landscape, history and nature at close hand. She is a volunteer with the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, doing practical work on local reserves. She is a member of the Long Distance Walkers Association. Sue's professional background is in social care and social and community development and she is keen to see improved access to the countryside and outdoor activities for people of all ages and abilities. *Susan has been a member of SLAF since October 2018.*

Clare Phillips – With a background in journalism, Clare has worked on the BBC's 'Farming Today' programme and presented countryside documentaries for BBC Radio Suffolk. Clare enjoys off-road running and walking in the Suffolk countryside, organises several Trail Races, and runs each year for her running club. She is a horse-rider and a Trustee of Ipswich Riding for the Disabled Group. Clare also chairs the footpaths sub-committee of Brantham Parish Council. *Clare has been a member of SLAF since October 2018.*

Monica Pipe – Monica farms just north of Ipswich and has many well-used footpaths on her land including the promoted Fynn Valley Walk. *Monica has been a member of SLAF since July 2003.*

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. *Cllr Jane Storey has been a member of SLAF since October 2009.*

John Wayman – A former district council member farming in the Stour Valley, John now contributes to the wider rural picture. *John has been a member of SLAF since July 2003.*

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. *Roley has been a member of SLAF since October 2013.*

Anthony Wright – A long-term cyclist and walker, Anthony has worked with several local authorities and publishers on the production of cycling and walking guides. For 15 years before retiring Anthony worked part-time for the national sustainable transport charity Sustrans as its Area Manager for Norfolk and Suffolk, while also working part-time as a Suffolk County Council Cycling Officer. He maintains an active interest in developing cycle routes and advises the Highways Agency and Norfolk & Suffolk Highways of their responsibilities for non-motorist users (NMU) safety on the highway. *Anthony has been a member of SLAF since July 2003.*