

SUFFOLK LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

Annual Report 2003 – 2004

Introduction

As required by the “The Local Access Forums (England) Regulations 2002”, this is the first Annual Report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum which I have pleasure in submitting to the county council as the appointing authority.

The Suffolk Local Access Forum (SLAF) came into existence in July 2003. It was set up by the county council under the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 as an independent advisory body to the authority on strategic access and recreation issues in the county.

Advertisements placed in the local press and other publicity attracted a large number of applicants from those interested in access to the countryside including users, landowners, land managers and conservation interests.

Following consideration of the applications by a panel of County Councillors, 17 members were appointed. In addition three members representing Suffolk local authorities were also nominated. At SLAF’s first meeting I was elected as its Chair.

Our Work

The SLAF has met five times in the past year and has discussed a range of access issues. To aid members understanding of their role, a number of presentations have been given at the meetings including access mapping and rights of way protection and maintenance. Site based training events have also been arranged looking at heathland and rights of way issues. Our meetings are open to members of the public and there are opportunities at meetings for them to raise or comment on issues discussed.

Some of the areas that we have been involved with include:

- Responding to the Countryside Agency’s consultation on the Draft Maps of Registered Common Land & Open Countryside. The SLAF responded at a strategic level rather than commenting on individual sites. We were concerned about the narrow definition of heathland being used as we felt that it did not reflect the strong cultural associations in Suffolk where unimproved grassland historically used as sheepwalks is seen as heathland. We also took issue with the reliance being placed on out of date survey information and urged the Countryside Agency to make use of the up to date mapping of the Sandlings heaths produced by the Suffolk Biological Records Centre. Issues were also raised connected with the re-creation of heathland, boundaries of access land, how former MoD land and golf courses on registered commons were treated and the need to ensure that people were aware how open access land related to public rights of way.

- Responding to various consultation documents produced by DEFRA including the 'Use of Mechanically Propelled Vehicles on Rights of Way'. This consultation focused on better enforcement of existing power to manage vehicle use, limiting the basis on which new rights of way may be acquired for such vehicles and ending the situation where historic use by horse-drawn vehicles can give rise to a right by modern vehicles. This resulted in a good deal of debate with input from members of the public. We were particularly concerned that some of the proposals were premature and should await the results of a research project on the use and condition of byways. We also felt that many of the time scales being suggested were unreasonable. These related to a cut-off date of one year for users to provide evidence of vehicular use of byways and the claiming of private easements.
- Our major task is to advise on the preparation of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) for Suffolk. This is a statutory duty of the County Council under the CROW Act (2000). Under the Act *"Rights of Way Improvement Plans are intended to be the prime means by which local highway authorities will identify the changes to be made in respect of management and improvements to their local rights of way network in order to meet the Governments aim of better provision for walkers, cyclists, equestrians and people with mobility problems."* The ROWIP will be closely linked to the Local Transport Plan from 2005 onwards. We have so far provided a strong input on advising on the assessment process and advising on the areas of priority to be covered by the ROWIP and the opportunities that could arise. Some areas covered have included:
 - Timetabling of the assessment process
 - Range of consultees
 - Access for the less able
 - Criteria for the assessment of the current network
 - Signage
 To aid our understanding a practical training session that allowed members to see some of the problems and opportunities of the rights of way network at first hand was run in April 2004.

Membership of SLAF

During the course of this first year two members resigned and there were two further resignations at the end of it. Two members have also offered themselves for re-selection for a further three-year term. The county council has placed newspaper advertisements, sent out press releases and made direct contact with relevant user groups in order seek volunteers to fill these vacancies in time for the first meeting of our second year.

Looking Ahead

The Provisional Maps of Registered Common Land & Open Countryside have just been published and we have yet to discuss the implications of any changes that been shown. Only objections will be considered by the

Countryside Agency from those with an interest in any land shown on the maps, but if there are appeals, SLAF may if they wish make representations as a third party.

Involvement in the assessment stage of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan will form a key part of our role over the coming year. We will primarily be looking at the responses that the county council has received to the consultations undertaken with users groups, landowners, parish councils, visitors/tourists, disadvantaged groups and the general public. Secondly, reviewing reports relating to current network condition and Rights of Way practice. Also reviewing promotion and publicity in order to guide the county council on the key issues that we consider need to be addressed in the Statement of Action.

SLAF is also looking forward to commenting on the Suffolk Coast and Heath AONB access plan shortly to be drafted and other draft countryside and access plans and strategies during the coming year .

Recommendations to Suffolk County Council

- The SLAF considers that following government guidance there should be a closer relationship within the county council between the Rights of Way Improvement Plan and the preparation of the Local Transport Plan.
- Improvements to the rights of way network identified through the ROWIP assessment process will need to be integrated with the LTP bidding process from 2005 and these should be identified at an early stage.
- We would wish to be involved in any forums set up by the LTP in order that rural sustainable access issues using public rights of way can be properly considered and funded.
- That as statutory consultees under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act s61, the Local Access Forum should be consulted by all sections of the County Council who are formulating plans relating to improvements for access to the countryside and open spaces including the areas of sustainable transport and social exclusion.

Annette Whybrow
Chair of the Suffolk Local Access Forum

June 2004