

SUFFOLK LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

ANNUAL REPORT 2004 - 2005

Introduction

As required by the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2002 I have pleasure in submitting the second Annual Report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum to the County Council as the Highway Authority.

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 County Council on matters relating to rights of way and access to the countryside. It is also a statutory consultee for the Countryside Agency on mapping of open country and plans and policies produced by a wide range of organisations.

It is made up from those interested in access to the countryside and rights of way including users, landowners, land managers, members of community organisations and conservation interests. The current membership is listed as appendix A.

Suffolk County Council manages the administration of the Suffolk Local Access Forum.

Our Work

The SLAF has met five times during the past year to discuss a range of issues that have arisen from consultations, papers and reports submitted to us by amongst others, the County Council, the Countryside Agency, the Environment Agency, DEFRA and the Suffolk Coast & Heaths partnership. Members of the public attending our meetings have also been given the opportunity to raise or comment on issues discussed.

In addition members of SLAF have been invited to take part in meetings organised by the Environment Agency on Estuarine Strategies, the Sandlings Group on open access and the Accessibility Forum for the Local Transport Plan.

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

Rights of Way Improvement Plan

Providing input and comment on the progress of the preparation of the County Councils' Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) was a major part of all our meetings this year. At the earlier meetings we were able to review the results of the surveys that had been undertaken with the general public, user groups and parish councils and the later meetings gave us the opportunity to

provide comment on the assessment report as it developed. The Assessment Report is a robust and thorough document. The results show that the network plays a vital role in community life and support of the local economy and tourism across the county. There is a high level use and interest in the network for recreation, health and access to services.

Early work on the second part of the ROWIP, the Statement of Action, shows a need to assess the level of funding available for the management of the county's Rights of Way. The Forum requested and discussed a report on the financial structure and considered current funding levels for maintenance and necessary improvement of the network were inadequate, and that additional funding would be needed to take forward many of the proposals that are emerging from work on the ROWIP Action Plan.

The Forum impresses the need for the County Council to take forward two further specific areas of work highlighted in the Assessment Report. Firstly, to focus definitive map project work, specifically to improve and develop the network for the public good. Secondly, the Forum welcomed the setting up of a steering group to develop the relationship between the County Council and land managers in raising awareness of access and network maintenance matters.

We also welcome that the assessment has highlighted the need for greater community involvement through parishes and volunteers in the management of the network.

Countryside Agency Provisional Access Mapping and Open Access

The Provisional Maps of Open Access Land for Suffolk were published by the Countryside Agency in June 2004. SLAF were pleased to note that several of the points relating to inclusion and exclusion of land that they had raised about the draft maps had been addressed. As a result of their earlier comments, SLAF was also made aware of several of the appeals to the Planning Inspectorate by landowners into inconsistencies in the mapping. With the appeal decisions now received the Countryside Agency will be able to produce the Conclusive Maps in September this year.

The future management of Open Access in the county has also been discussed by the Forum. The county will as of November 2005 have over 5,000 hectares of access land. Suffolk has major conservation and access management issues with 80% of all open access land having some level of conservation classification and possibly up to 40% of the access land having some form of restriction, particularly in relation to ground nesting birds. The Forum acknowledges the County Councils success on gaining external funding to improve access to these sites, manage restrictions and provide interpretation and public education which will be ongoing for two years but thereafter the county as access authority is expected to fund its management.

Consultations

Estuarine Strategies

SLAF have been involved in commenting on the Environment Agency's estuarine strategies for the Blythe, Alde and Ore and Deben. We noted that some of the options being considered would result in disruption of the rights of way network and restrict access to river and estuary banks. As this could be seen to have a knock-on effect on tourism and the local economy of the Suffolk Coast & Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty it was agreed to take this issue further with the Environment Agency. The outcome has been further discussion by members jointly with the County Council, Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Unit and the Environment Agency to develop a consistency in the maintenance of rights of way in the case of both abandonment and managed retreat. We press the County Council to ensure that the same level of access is retained as a consequence of any changes that may result in the re-alignment of sea and river defences.

Further consultation

SLAF was also consulted by DEFRA on a draft circular regarding the functions of access authorities, our comments raising issues of concern regarding signage, protection of rights of way and sensitive areas were sent to them. Another DEFRA consultation related to Rights of Way Registers and Joint Orders.

Presentations and visits

During the year presentations were given to SLAF on:

- Open Access Issues from the Countryside Agency;
- A Review of the Suffolk Coast & Heaths Path and the Stour & Orwell Path from the Coast & Heaths Unit;
- The issue of motor sports on public rights of way from a representative of the Federation of Eastern Sport.
- Prior to our meeting in September SLAF were able to find out about the recreational opportunities available at the High Lodge Forest Centre in Thetford Forest.

Membership of SLAF

During the past year there have been several changes of membership of SLAF. We welcomed new members Angela Brown, Gordon Merfield, Norman Southgate, Linda Hoggarth, Bryan Freemantle, Mary Mitson-Woods and John Pearson having accepted the resignation of Tony Harvey and Charles Swan. We also reviewed our Terms of Reference and Operating Procedures and decided that in future members' would serve for three years before needing to seek re-election.

Looking Ahead

With the Conclusive Maps of open access land in Suffolk expected in the autumn, SLAF will be consulted by the Countryside Agency on long-term closures of some of the mapped land because of its conservation value relating particularly to ground-nesting birds such as stone-curlew.

We also look forward to being involved in commenting on the draft Local Transport Plan and further input into the Rights of Way Improvement Plan as the responses to the Assessment stage are analysed and the Action Plan developed.

It is proposed that members should have an annual seminar/training day, this will be particularly helpful for the new members of SLAF.

Recommendations for Suffolk County Council to Consider:

- a) That the County Council reviews the level of funding available for Rights of Way network maintenance, as current levels of expenditure appear to insufficient to maintain it to a adequate standard. It would seem that further expenditure will be required to take forward rights of way improvement and to implement the ROWIP Action Plan.
- b) The Environment Agency and Highway Authority, when considering flood defence strategies take full account of rights of way and maintain the same level of public access to and around our estuaries.
- c) That the County Council encourages greater community involvement in rights of way management.
- d) That the County Council considers how medium and long term implications for management of open access will be financed.
- e) The County Council continues to foster working relationships between land managers, user groups and the County Council.
- f) That the County Council focuses its definitive map work and resources into the improvement of the network.

Annette Whybrow
Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum
June 2005

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MEMBERS DETAILS

David Barker – Landowner (other interests local business and conservation). With his wide experience within the NFU, CLA and as a former Countryside Agency commissioner, David seeks to work to balance all interests involved in access to the countryside.

Angela Brown - Equestrian riding (other interests walking and access for all). Angela has a long standing involvement in long distance riding and is a member of the Mid Suffolk Bridleways Association. In her professional capacity she is very much aware of the health benefits that stem from walking.

Bryan Collen – Landowner (other interests tourism and walking). Brian has been involved in many organisations including the NFU, Anglian Water, Internal Drainage Boards and the County Council's Rights of Way Liaison Committee, so he is able to appreciate other people's views.

Julie Craven – Walking (other interests conservation and access for all). Through her past involvement in local government and other bodies, Julie has a wide breadth of knowledge of rights of way, countryside management and conservation, access and tourism issues.

Linda Hoggarth – Rethink Disability chairman (other interests Access for all) Through Rethink Linda has been involved in a leisure service for disabled people providing opportunities for people to take part in activities such as bird watching, fishing, 'healthy walks'. She has also chaired the Physical and Sensory disabilities Partnership Group and the Governing body of Thomas Wolsey School.

Bryan Freemantle – Building Contractor (other interests horse riding) Bryan worked as county access and bridleways officer for 8 years. He also worked on a large country estate in Suffolk for 10 years and attended agricultural college.

Rob Lucking – Conservation (other interests landowner/manager). Although a Conservation Officer for the RSPB, Rob will bring to the Forum the views of other bodies who own and manage land for conservation with public access such as English Nature and the Suffolk Wildlife Trust.

Gordon Merfield - Access for all (other interests walking and cycling). With a past background in agriculture; since the 1980's Gordon has been active in participating and coaching in field sports events as well as being interested in the wider countryside and walking in foreign countries.

Mary Mitson-Woods – Chief Executive, Suffolk Association of Local Councils. Membership of the SCC Countryside Access Group which involved encouraging parish and town councils to value ROW and the hinterland countryside to their village as the most valuable recreational facility in the village. Working knowledge of the CROW Act and its impact on parish councils and landowners.

John W Pearson – Retired Principal, Otley College. Professional qualification horticulture agri-conservation environment and business management. As principal was involved in all aspects of countryside development. Country member of NFU. Former education training director British Landscape Industry training organisation.

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

Norman Southgate - Motorised vehicle use (other interests water based activities and walking). As Rights of Way Officer for the Suffolk Landrover Owners Club Norman keeps members aware of where they can legally go off-road. He is also a keen sailor and a member of the Copdock & Washbrook footpath maintenance working group.

Iain Taylor – Walking (other interests conservation and access for all). A retired Sales Office Manager, Iain is a past Chair of Suffolk and Sudbury and district Ramblers Association and belongs to the Suffolk Wildlife Trust.

Mike Taylor – Landowner (other interests conservation and tourism). With his Forestry Commission background, Mike will bring the experience of managing large tracts of land as a business whilst ensuring that conservation and public access are fully taken into account to the Forum.

Mark Timms - Walking (other interests conservation and cycling). Mark is the Project Officer for the Upper Waveney Valley Project, is a keen walker and cyclist, He works with local communities and landowners on a day to day basis on conservation and access issues.

Keith Turner - Conservation (other interests tourism and access for all). Through his past and current work, Keith has broad experience of balancing the needs of conservation with public access and liaising with other user and interest groups.

John Wayman – Landowner (other interests tourism and conservation). A former district council member farming in the Stour Valley, John feels that he now would like to contribute to a the wider rural picture.

Annette Whybrow – Landowner (other interest local business). A solicitor who is a former chair of the Suffolk Chamber of Commerce, Annette is involved with the CLA and attends the County Council’s Rights of Way Liaison Committee.

Anthony Wright – Cycling (other interests tourism and walking). A long-term cyclist and walker, Anthony has worked with several local authorities on the production of cycling and walking publication and works part time with the sustainable transport charity Sustrans.

In addition there are three local authority members;

Jane Midwood – Councillor, Suffolk County Council. Portfolio Holder for adult care and community services.

Phillip Dunnett – Suffolk Coastal District Council

Don Levick - Forest Heath District Council