

SUFFOLK LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

ANNUAL REPORT 2007 – 2008

Introduction

1. As required by the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2002 I have pleasure in submitting the fifth Annual Report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum to Suffolk County Council as the Highway Authority.
2. 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 Natural England on mapping of open country and plans and policies produced by a wide range of organisations. The forum is administered by Suffolk County Council.
3. 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 below.

Our Work

4. The SLAF has met four 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, DEFRA, Natural England, Highways Agency, Environment Agency and Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB.
5. Members of the public attending our meetings have also been given the opportunity to raise or comment on issues discussed.
6. In addition, members of SLAF have been invited to take part in meetings and training organised by Natural England. Members continued to liaise with land managers and user groups and other agencies on improving access in Suffolk.
7. Main areas of work that we have been involved in are, as follows.

Investment in Rights of Way

8. We congratulate officers on their continued success in seeking and finding external funding and grants. This year has again seen funds successfully obtained through the Local Transport Plan, open access management grant, East of England Development Agency, the Suffolk Development Agency and section 106 contributions from developers providing a wide range of improvements to the rights of way network and open access land. Recent work encouraging developer contributions to rights of way development through section 106 agreements is supported and encouraged by the forum.
9. The forum wishes the county council success in the current bid for 'Changing Spaces – Access to Nature' funding for a community involvement initiative.
10. Whilst recognising current investment in rights of way through the Local Transport Plan, the forum are concerned that future county council

accessibility targets should not work against the development of sustainable access in rural areas by favouring urban areas.

Rights of Way Crossing Trunk Roads

11. The forum has raised concerns with the Highways Agency about the lack of non-motorised user access across the proposed Tothill interchange near Stowmarket. The forum had objected to the scheme with the outcome that the inspector recommended a new non-motorised user audit to be undertaken and for recommendations of the audit be included in the detailed design of the scheme. The forum objected to the final design and concluded that access provision was not adequate, especially for equestrians. The forum formally expressed its concerns in a letter to Tom Harris MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Transport.
12. The forum visited the construction site in July and were disappointed at the lack of provisions for equestrians and alarmed at the potential dangerous nature for non-motorised users of the new junction at Tothill.
13. The forum are very concerned that the Highways Agency proposals for the A11 dualling between Fiveways and Thetford have so far failed to address properly the rights of way crossings despite policies that apparently support better access. The forum believes the county council should use its full resources to ensure the agency does accommodate the rights of way either side of the A11.

Coastal Issues

14. The forum has been kept informed with the progress of the proposed Coastal Access process. The forum had previously responded to the DEFRA consultation on the proposed options. The forum endorsed the county council's response to the draft Marine Bill, published on 3rd April 2008, and look forward to participating in the future development of coastal access.
15. The forum strongly support the county council's position on ensuring that the Environment Agency strategy for the Blyth estuary should take a long term view and should protect local interests including public access, landscapes and the local economy.
16. The Blyth estuary strategy proposed very limited maintenance of existing defences in the short term (up to 20 years) and no maintenance at all thereafter. The forum considered the strategy and wrote to the Environment Agency on 11th February 2008 in response to its consultation.
17. The forum's view is that there should be a long term strategy for managing retreat over time (as the Environment Agency proposed in 2005), with proper provision for implementing alternative access arrangements. The forum are alarmed at the likely loss of significant parts of the rights of way network should the policy of limited maintenance be enacted and it is the forum's concern that additional losses will impact on visitor and local needs as well as putting an unreasonable burden on the highway authority to re-establish access.
18. In the event of any of the proposals being implemented, the forum is concerned that suitable alternative access provision should be made. It wishes further to express its concern over the replacement of strategic

thinking with short term proposals, and the immediacy of actions envisaged in the Draft Strategy.

19. A site visit to the area is scheduled with the Environment Agency on 7th October 2008.

Open Access

20. Suffolk County Council manages 12,500 hectares of open access land which also has the highest level of restrictions in England. The forum is a statutory consultee on the making of long term directions. The forum has taken a robust but flexible approach to its decisions supporting restrictions on open access.
21. Natural England (NE) presented their review of directions for conservation on open access land in Suffolk at an extraordinary SLAF meeting on 13th February 2008, followed by SLAF members attending a Natural England meeting in Norwich on 19th February 2008.
22. NE identified open access restrictions for 2008 and confirmed longer term arrangements for the next 6 years subject to annual reviews. NE reported few problems with open access in Suffolk but felt it was necessary to continue to monitor use and bird disturbance annually.
23. It had been reported by several land managers and conservation organisations that continued wardening and monitoring, managed by the county council, was required. SLAF strongly endorse this view. Subsequently, NE have funded a warden for the summer and autumn of 2008 and field monitoring of usage and knowledge of open access.

Local Communities

24. The forum have expressed concern that some parishes lack effective access to their local countryside and asked officers to investigate this further. The forum understands that this lack of provision can be met through delivery of the wider Right of Way Improvement Plan objectives.
25. The forum welcomes the recruitment of a Community Involvement post to enable local communities to become more actively involved in their local rights of way and bid for additional funding through the Lottery Fund 'Changing Spaces' grant scheme.

Consultations

26. SLAF has been consulted on:
 - a) A11 dualling
 - b) Proposals to improve access to the English Coast – DEFRA
 - c) Blyth Estuary Draft Strategy – Environment Agency
 - d) Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Management Plan

Presentations and Training

27. SLAF have had presentations and training on:
 - a) Natural England directions for conservation on Open Access
 - b) Local Transport Plan Schemes 2007/08 & 2008/09
 - c) Rights of Way Improvement Plan – Action Plan progress
 - d) Discovering Lost Ways

- e) A11 dualling
- f) Ipswich Definitive Map
- g) Marine Bill
- h) England Access Forum
- i) SLAF members attended a Local Access Forum training seminar, organised by Natural England, in Ely on 10th March 2008.

Site Visits

28. Tothill Junction (Haughley Bends) A14 – A site visit was arranged on 24th July 2008 with the Project Manager.

Membership of SLAF

- a) During the past year there have been four meetings, all of which have been well attended.
- b) The forum currently has 21 members. This year two resignations were received, and five new members appointed, including one district council member and one county council member. In order to maintain a balance of interests within the forum, it is hoped that new members with interests in tourism and/or cycling will be recruited in the future. A full membership and attendance list is provided (Appendix B)

Looking Ahead

- a) A joint event has been arranged with the Broads LAF and Norfolk LAF on 11th November 2008. Natural England will continue to provide a range of training seminars. The practice of making at least one site visit per year will continue in 2008-09 with a visit arranged to Blyth estuary on 7th October 2008.
29. Members welcome the opportunity to work closely with officers of the county council on:
- a) Parishes with limited access or no rights of way
 - b) Coastal management and coastal access
 - c) Development of accessible routes on the urban fringe
 - d) Improvements of A11 / A12 / A14 crossings points
 - e) Community development including work with Suffolk Association of Local Councils and community groups.

Recommendations for Suffolk County Council to consider:

- a) That SLAF recognises and welcomes the continued investment in rights of way through the local transport plan process both for maintenance and improvements in 2007/08 and congratulates the county council on raising external funding. At the same time it encourages the County Council to maintain its revenue base budget for the maintenance and protection of the network. SLAF is concerned that future county council accessibility targets may increasingly favour urban areas at the expense of the rural community. There is further concern that 2008/09 saw a decrease in LTP investment in structural maintenance.

- b) The forum are very disappointed that the Highways Agency have failed to comply with its own policies on protecting and enhancing access for non-motorised users on the current proposals to dual the A11. The forum encourages Suffolk County Council to use its position as the local highway authority to apply maximum pressure and influence on the Highways Agency to improve provision both on the A11 and other trunk roads in the county.
- c) The forum welcomes Suffolk County Council's strong position on representing local interests in its dealings with the Environment Agency, particularly with the Blyth estuary and strongly encourages the council to maintain its position.

John W Pearson
Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum
August 2008

SUFFOLK LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

Members and Contact Details

David Barker (Vice Chairman) – 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. 4 meetings.

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. 3 meetings.

Rosemary Clarke - was elected to Suffolk County Council in May 2005. She is the Assistant Portfolio Holder for Adult and Community Services, co-Chair of the Learning Disability Partnership Board and a member of Suffolk Police Authority. Rosie lives within a mile of the coast in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB. 1 meeting (joined forum January 08).

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. 4 meetings.

Kirsty Turner – Interested in conservation and the concerns of landowners and land managers. As a conservation officer with the RSPB, Kirsty has worked within nature conservation since 2002, striving to ensure that the needs of wildlife and the environment are integrated appropriately with the provision of new or increased access opportunities for people. 2 meetings (joined forum October 2007).

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. 4 meetings.

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. 3 meetings.

Barry Hall – Interests in walking, conservation and cycling. Barry is a retired local government officer with experience of working on Countryside and Rights of Way projects. Since his retirement Barry has retained an interest in the provision and promotion of access to the Countryside, and is a member of RSPB, Suffolk Wildlife Trust and National Trust. 3 meetings (joined forum October 2007).

Councillor Sandy Martin – Ipswich Borough Council Local Authority. Councillor. Sandy Martin lived in Halesworth from 1971 to 1993, and has lived in Ipswich since then. He is a keen walker and cyclist. He was elected to Suffolk County Council in 1997 and to Ipswich Borough Council in 2002, and is currently a Councillor on both Authorities. He acted as deputy to the County Portfolio Holder for Environment & Transport from 2001 to 2005, and is now Labour opposition spokesman on the environment at both Ipswich and County Councils. 1 meeting (joined forum February 2008).

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. 4 meetings.

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. 1 meeting.

John W Pearson (Chairman) – Retired Principal. 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. 3 meetings.

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. 4 meetings.

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. 3 meetings.

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. 3 meetings.

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. 3 meetings.

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. 1 meeting.

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. 3 meetings.

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. 3 meetings.

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. 3 meetings.