

SUFFOLK LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

ANNUAL REPORT August 2010 – July 2011

Introduction

1. As required by the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2002 I have pleasure in submitting the eighth 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 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 those with conservation interests.
4. Full membership for 2010/11 is listed below.

Our Work

5. The forum met four times during the past year at quarterly intervals to discuss a range of issues that have arisen from consultations, presentations, papers, reports and site visits from amongst others, Suffolk County Council, DEFRA, Natural England, Forestry Commission, England Access Forum, Alde and Ore Futures, Highways Agency and Network Rail.
6. 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.
7. Members of SLAF attend regional meetings, conferences and neighbouring local access forums to improve access in Suffolk.

SLAF Cost

8. SLAF have their own identity to ensure they are clearly recognisable as an independent body with letter heading with PO address box and an independent email address. Development of a dedicated website is being looked into on the One Suffolk platform.
9. The cost for servicing SLAF for 2010-2011 was approximately £1,500. This includes secretariat, room hire and member travel expenses. To place this in context, the overall budget for Countryside Access is £1.2M.

Investment in Rights of Way

10. We congratulate officers on successfully obtaining significant funds in partnership with Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB with the BALANCE Project, a European funded project between UK and European partners. BALANCE will fund access improvements and increase awareness of countryside access across the AONB.
11. The forum congratulates officers in obtaining significant investment in partnership with St Edmundsbury Borough Council Growth Area Funding for green infrastructure improvements to develop access along the Lark Valley Path.

12. The forum welcomes officers securing Natural England Access Management Grant Scheme and Community funds to fund improvements of open access sites.
13. The forum were consulted on the draft Local Transport Plan 3 (LTP3) and welcomes the opportunities LTP3 offers with a focus on healthy activity.
14. The forum emphasised that rights of way can demonstrably deliver the type of low cost sustainable transport solutions that the Department of Transport are looking for.
15. The forum stressed that this should be reflected in SCC's funding decisions and distribution of funds should not favour urban areas at the expense of developing sustainable access in rural areas, with the needs of non-motorised users fully considered when allocating LTP funding.

Transfer of Countryside Sites

16. The forum were greatly concerned at the pace at which proposals had been progressing with the concern that public access across sites and links between rights of way could be lost or compromised, having considerable effect on people's enjoyment of the countryside, health and quality of life.
17. SLAF wrote and met with Cllr Judy Terry, SCC Portfolio Holder for the Greenest County, and officers to express these concerns, and this was followed with detailed discussions over safeguarding public access at each site.
18. The forum feels that dedication of access rights with public rights of way or open access should be completed before transferring. In addition, the County Council should maintain control and repair of any former railway bridges on all the relevant sites.

Future of the Public Forest Estate

19. The forum are greatly concerned about the future of the Public Forest Estate (PFE) and its continued and enhanced use by the public for enjoyment, learning, health, quality of life and contribution to the local economy.
20. The forum carried out a site visit to Dunwich Forest and received a presentation from the Forestry Commission to identify issues with the PFE and access.
21. The forum welcomed the creation of the Independent Panel on Forestry (IPF) but is concerned at the lack of representation of access user groups on the panel.
22. The forum wrote to the Chairman of the IPF to urge the panel to give access the highest priority and invite them to visit Suffolk to see at first hand what the PFE offers visitors.
23. The IPF have confirmed they will visit East Anglia.
24. The forum are working closely with Norfolk LAF on this issue.

Rights of Way Severance

25. SLAF corresponded with Matthew Hancock MP and are pleased that the needs of non-motorised users are now recognised in the design of the dualling of the A11.
26. The forum are concerned about the effect any pressures on the scheme budget may have on access, including the height of the bridleway underpass and the surface of any diverted rights of way.
27. The forum supports and encourages the work of officers, especially with the Suffolk Road Rail Partnership, to protect and improve access at a number of rail crossing points.
28. The forum have expressed concern with Network Rail over the Ipswich Chord scheme and its impact on access and safety. The forum support SCC and Sustrans' efforts in securing and improving access in this location.

Higher Level Stewardship

29. The forum wrote to Tim Yeo MP and Dr Dan Poulter MP to stress their concern over plans to end Higher Level Stewardship payments for countryside access.
30. SLAF's Vice Chair (in his capacity as Chair of Creating the Greenest County) led a delegation of Suffolk farmers to meet DEFRA Minister Richard Benyon at Parliament to discuss the issue. The delegation (all of whom were agreement holders with Natural England (NE)) was supported by Dr Dan Poulter MP and David Ruffley MP.
31. The delegation explained the implications of losing access and the value of access to users and their enjoyment of the countryside. The minister explained that the major reason for removing access in future agreements was cost. Access funding received no support from the EU whereas biodiversity payments were more than match funded by the EU. However, the minister announced that funding for educational visits by school children would now be part of the scheme.

DEFRA's Natural Environment White Paper 'The Natural Choice'

32. The forum responded to DEFRA's consultation 'Shape the Nature of England' in advance of the White Paper 'The Natural Choice' highlighting;
 - a) the importance of public access in understanding the natural environment and enjoying the associated health benefits
 - b) the importance of agri-environmental schemes
 - c) the important role of agriculture
 - d) the needs of non-motorised users, in particular horse riders
33. The forum welcomes the White Paper and are keen to be included as a member of the proposed Local Nature Partnership.

Open Access

34. NE presented their review of directions for conservation on open access land in Suffolk at a meeting held in Santon Downham, Brandon on 12th January 2011.
35. NE subsequently attended a SLAF meeting on 20th January 2011 to present their review to all members.
36. NE identified open access restrictions for 2011, justifying continued restrictions with successful ground nesting bird populations, Stone Curlew in particular, on a number of sites.
37. SLAF congratulates the Council in successful bids to NE's Access Management Grant Scheme to improve access with new gates and information at sites managed by RSPB and Ipswich Borough Council, and NE's Community Fund to improve information at open access sites.

Coastal Access

38. SLAF have been kept informed of the progress of Coastal Access and welcome its implementation in Suffolk.
39. The forum support the Council in working to improve access ahead of the Coastal Access scheme with specific regard to the Stour and Orwell estuaries.

Other Issues

40. The forum expressed concern that NE's Study of Accessible Natural Green Space ignored the access provided by public rights of way.
41. The forum commented on a gating order request in Felixstowe, agreeing with the request.
42. SLAF supported the presence of the England Access Forum (EAF) as a means of sharing advice between forums, raising issues at a national level and ensuring greater recognition of LAFs by government departments and other organisations. However, the forum believed the EAF required more effective communication at a regional level and should either be retained or a national champion identified to represent LAF views at a national level.
43. The EAF has since ended and NE have requested local champions to raise issues at a national level.

Consultations

44. SLAF has been consulted on:
 - a) DEFRA Natural Environment White Paper 'The Natural Choice'
 - b) Natural England Assessment of Accessible Natural Green Space
 - c) Department for Communities and Local Government draft National Planning Policy Framework
 - d) Future of the Public Forest Estate
 - e) Future of England Access Forum
 - f) Higher Level Stewardship
 - g) Open Access directions by NE
 - h) Local Transport Plan 3
 - i) Transferring of Countryside Sites

- j) Alde and Ore Futures
- k) Ipswich Chord
- l) Gating Order in Felixstowe

Meetings

45. SLAF members have attended meetings on:
- a) Regional LAF Chair Meeting – 28th September 2010 – David Barker (Vice Chair) attended to raise local issues
 - b) Natural England directions for conservation on Open Access – 12th January 2011
 - c) Eastern Region LAF Conference – 15th March 2011 – David Barker (Vice Chair) presented on the future of agri-environmental schemes and Barry Hall presented on achievements of SLAF
 - d) Stour and Orwell Estuary Access Group – Barry Hall

Presentations

46. SLAF received presentations on:
- a) Local Transport Plan 3 – Dave Watson, SCC
 - b) Natural England Study of Accessible Natural Green Space (ANGSt) – Diana Curtiss, NE
 - c) Open Access directions by NE – Diana Curtiss, NE
 - d) Future of Public Forest – Simon Leatherdale, Forestry Commission
 - e) Alde and Ore Futures – Bill Parker, Inter Coastal Zone Manager (ICZM) Initiative Officer

Site Visit

47. Dunwich Forest – A site visit took place with Simon Leatherdale (Forestry Commission) and Mel Kemp (RSPB) on 7th April 2011 to see how the forest is managed with regard to public access and learn about the management and costs associated with access. The site visit was followed by a meeting where Simon Leatherdale presented on the Future of the Forest Estate.

Membership of SLAF

48. During the past year there have been four meetings, all of which were very well attended.
49. A full membership list for 2010/11 is provided (Appendix B).

Looking Ahead

50. The practice of making at least one site visit per year will continue.
51. Priorities for SLAF over the coming year include;
- a) Ensuring the county council budget for rights of way and wider access continues to be sufficient to deliver a viable service and rights of way improvement plan priorities.
 - b) The future of the Public Forest Estate and preserving and enhancing public access.

- c) Transferring of countryside sites and preserving and enhancing public access.
- d) Severance of public access along rights of way by road and rail networks.
- e) The future of agri-environmental schemes to provide countryside access.

Main Recommendations for Suffolk County Council to consider are:

- a) The Suffolk Local Access Forum recognises the continued pressures on all budgets but notes the savings in the 2011/12 maintenance budgets and encourages the Council to continue investing in the public rights of way and access network to reflect the importance of countryside access on stronger, healthier communities and the rural tourism economy.
- b) The forum are concerned at the speed and direction of transferring countryside sites and encourages the Council to ensure sites remain public spaces in a condition fit for use for the benefit of all to promote healthier communities and a more sustainable economy.
- c) The forum are concerned about the future of the Public Forest Estate and its use for enjoyment, learning, health and contribution to the local economy. The forum considers that Suffolk County Council should give a high priority to public access in the Forest Estates for all users to ensure access is safeguarded for the future.
- d) The forum is disappointed over changes to agri-environmental schemes and potential loss of permissive access to areas of the countryside. The forum vice chair met Richard Benyon MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Natural Environment and Fisheries, to discuss these concerns.
- e) The forum continues to give a high priority to the loss of access where routes are severed by trunk roads or railways. The forum are keen to ensure that adequate bridleway access across the dualled A11 is delivered by the Highways Agency, and have noted with some alarm recent moves by Network Rail to seek emergency closures of some rights of way across railways.
- f) The Suffolk Local Access Forum is an efficient, balanced and cost-effective forum providing an important advisory service to the Council and other organisations by raising issues regarding how the public access the countryside and use the public rights of way network for leisure, health and sustainable travel options.

Bryan Collen
Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

David Barker
Vice Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

JULY 2011

SUFFOLK LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

Members Details

Councillor Jenny Antill – A retired investment banker, Jenny is a Member of Babergh District Council for Waldingfield. Closely involved with local conservation groups, Jenny is keen to protect the vulnerable green edges of the town, while encouraging the citizens of Sudbury to get out into the countryside.

Melinda Appleby – Since childhood Melinda has had an interest in wildlife and conservation. With a degree in Rural Environmental Studies, Melinda has pursued these interests in her career with the Countryside Movement, the RSPB, NFU, and at Suffolk County Council.

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 involved in countryside access. David is also Chair of Creating the Greenest County.

Bryan Collen – (Chair) Bryan has been involved in the NFU, Anglian Water, Internal Drainage Boards and the County Council's Rights of Way Liaison Committee.

Barry Hall – 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 RSPB, SWT and NT.

Margaret Hancock – Margaret is a Blue Badge Tourist Guide. A keen cyclist, Margaret is passionate about promoting sustainable tourism by encouraging walking, cycling and the use of public transport. Margaret is a volunteer for the Out and About charity, providing support for children and young people with disabilities.

Ann Langley – Ann is involved with the Pony Club, the Easton Harriers Hunt, and is a founder member of the Mid-Suffolk Bridleways Association which works to maintain and open bridleways. Ann is also Councillor on Ashfield cum Thorpe Parish Council.

Councillor Sandy Martin – Ipswich Borough Council and SCC 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 opposition spokesman for environment at Ipswich Borough Council and Leader of Suffolk County Council Labour Group

Gordon Merfield – With a 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.

Alan Moore – Alan is a retired Head of Regional Planning and Transport for the East of England Regional Assembly, and is now a volunteer with the Stroke Association and West Suffolk Headway. With a particular focus on access for disabled people, Alan is interested in the issue of local access and the need to ensure that it is properly and effectively provided for in both urban and rural areas.

Mary Norden – Mary works for the RSPB, is a member of Suffolk Bat Group, a bat worker for Natural England and supports the Bat Conservation Trust's national monitoring programmes. Mary is also a keen walker and cyclist.

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

Norman Southgate – Rights of way officer for the Suffolk Landrover Owners Club, Norman keeps members aware of where they can legally go off-road. He is a keen sailor and member of the Copdock & Washbrook footpath maintenance working group.

Councillor Jane Storey – SCC Councillor for Thedwastre North, has interests around walking, dog-walking, off-road driving and being a farmer's daughter with some strong views along the lines that with rights come responsibilities. Jane believes that we should preserve our Rights of Way, including BOATS 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.

Mike Taylor – With a Forestry Commission background, Mike brings experience of managing large tracts of land as a business whilst ensuring that conservation and public access are fully taken into account.

John Wayman – 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.

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.