

Suffolk Local Access Forum

Annual Report – August 2011 – July 2012

Introduction

1. As required by the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2002 I have pleasure in submitting the ninth 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 the Rights of Way and Access team, Suffolk County Council.
3. The forum 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 2011/12 is listed below.

Our Work

5. The forum met at quarterly intervals in 2011/12 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, Highways Agency, Network Rail, the Independent Panel on Forestry, Babergh District Council, Suffolk Biodiversity Partnership and the Forestry Commission.
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. Local parish councils are alerted to SLAF meetings in their area and invited to attend.
8. Members of SLAF attend regional meetings and conferences and neighbouring local access forums to improve access in Suffolk.

SLAF Cost

9. SLAF have their own identity to ensure they are clearly recognisable as an independent body with letter heading with PO address box, an independent email address and a dedicated website on the One Suffolk platform - <http://publicrightsofway.onesuffolk.net/suffolk-local-access-forum>
10. The cost for servicing SLAF for 2011-12 was approximately £2,000. 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

11. The forum congratulates officers on delivering improvements to public rights of way and countryside access in partnership with Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area's of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) through the BALANCE Project. BALANCE is a £500k (approx) European match-funded project to manage visitors in environmentally sensitive landscapes. Rights of Way and Access have £100k (approx) of funding to deliver access improvements within the AONB. The key BALANCE access project is improving the Sailors Path (a long distance footpath between Aldeburgh and Snape) for accessibility, including wheelchair users.
12. The forum congratulates officers in delivering significant improvements to access in partnership with St Edmundsbury Borough Council Growth Area Funding. This funding is delivering improvements along the Lark Valley Path, north of Bury St Edmunds, for safe, off-road cycling.
13. The forum congratulates officers in delivering Natural England Community Funding to improve access and awareness of open access sites.
14. The forum welcomes investment in public rights of way through Local Transport Plan 3 (LTP3), although are concerned this concentrates resources in urban locations.
15. The forum is concerned that within a predominantly rural county access improvements are difficult to fund in rural locations. The forum suggests that relatively low cost solutions can be delivered with rights of way improvement schemes providing a positive impact on people's quality of life, health benefits and the rural economy.
16. The forum is encouraged that officers are proactively working with community groups to develop ideas to bid to Natural England's new fund, Paths for Communities. This fund will enable the creation of new rights of way and promotion of countryside access.

Rights of Way Severance

17. SLAF is pleased that the needs of non-motorised users were incorporated into designs for the dualling of the A11.
18. However, the forum was very concerned about the intention to reduce the height of the bridleway underpass near Elveden Monument, adversely affecting its use for horse riders.
19. The forum pressed the Highways Agency on this and is delighted that they have altered the underpass design to accommodate horse riders, without the need to dismount.
20. The forum is also very concerned with Network Rail's approach to rights of way level crossings and the lack of coordination by Network Rail with a policy of closing crossings as a first option. SLAF question this approach when alternative, more suitable options may be available to improve public access.
21. SLAF received a presentation from NR on this policy and pressed the case for improving public access, not losing it.
22. SLAF supports the work of officers, especially with the Suffolk Road Rail Partnership, to improve access at a number of key crossing points.

23. The forum continues to support SCC and Sustrans' efforts in securing and improving access at the location of the Ipswich Chord.

Future of the Public Forest Estate

24. The forum welcomed the formation of the Independent Panel on Forestry to advise government on the future of the Public Forest Estate.
25. The role of the Independent Panel on Forestry was crucial to future decisions about the Public Forest Estate and SLAF was keen to be invited to a visit by the panel to East Anglia. SLAF worked closely with the Norfolk Local Access Forum prior to the visit to discuss a joint approach. The visit took place on 28 March 2012 and SLAF was able to make representation to the panel.
26. The panel published their Final Report in July 2012 and the forum broadly welcome their vision for the future of forests and woodlands in England.
27. However, the forum remain concerned about the future of the Public Forest Estate and the opportunity it offers the public for improved quality of life, health benefits, learning and contribution to the local rural economy.
28. The forum are disappointed the panel did not take the opportunity to propose the dedication of higher rights of access to meet the needs of equestrians and cyclists. The forum has expressed this view to MPs.

Babergh's Green Infrastructure Framework

29. The forum welcome the opportunity to participate in developing Babergh's Green Infrastructure Framework to preserve and enhance countryside access in the district and play a role in helping the district decide on the level of its Community Infrastructure Levy.

Norfolk and Suffolk Local Nature Partnership

30. The forum was encouraged to be involved at a very early stage in the consultation process to develop a Norfolk and Suffolk Local Nature Partnership (LNP).
31. The LNP 'Wild Anglia' gained approval from DEFRA in July 2012 and the forum are keen to be represented on the new board, ensuring that countryside access is a key issue for the new partnership.

Open Access

32. SLAF congratulates the Council in obtaining funds and delivering improvements with Natural England's Community Funding to develop signage of open access sites across the county. This project involved working with partners including National Trust, RSPB and volunteers to raise awareness of sites.
33. SLAF support the retention of extended restrictions on five open access sites beyond the standard March-July period to keep dogs on short fixed leads in the month of August to protect ground nesting birds.
34. SLAF are concerned over the cessation of open access funding by Natural England resulting in the loss of a warden to monitor open access sites across Suffolk.

Other Issues

35. **Communication between Local Access Forums:** The forum was concerned with the loss of the England Access Forum as a national voice for Local Access Forums and expressed these concerns to Natural England. SLAF welcome the continued role of a Regional Local Access Forum Coordinator but have expressed their reservations to Natural England about replacing the England Access Forum with Huddle, an on-line resource. Access to Huddle is restricted to five members per forum and SLAF are concerned this places an unnecessary, additional burden on those members whilst limiting the scope for other members to be aware or involved with other forums on key issues.
36. **Coastal Path:** The forum is interested in the progress of a Coastal Path nationally and very interested in the lessons being learned developing coastal access in Norfolk. SLAF remain concerned that a key feature of Suffolk's coastline, its estuaries, will prevent a continual coastal route and SLAF will press Natural England to enable the Coastal Path to continue along estuaries to the first permanent crossing point.
37. **Ipswich Waterfront:** SLAF support the work of officers in securing public access along Ipswich Waterfront.
38. **Countryside sites:** The forum is pleased with the progress of dedicating rights of way on countryside sites previously managed by SCC.

Consultations

39. SLAF has been consulted on:
 - a) SCC's Budget Consultation;
 - b) Future of the Public Forest Estate (DEFRA/Independent Panel on Forestry);
 - c) Local Nature Partnerships (Suffolk Biodiversity Partnership);
 - d) Review of Open Access Restrictions (Natural England);
 - e) Draft National Planning Policy Framework (Department for Communities and Local Government);
 - f) Consultation on Town and Village Green Registration (DEFRA); and
 - g) National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) developing guidance on walking and cycling (Department of Health).

Meetings

40. SLAF members have attended meetings on:
 - a) 20 July 2011 – Norfolk Local Access Forum, attended by Bryan Collen (Chair) to discuss a shared approach to the visit to East Anglia of the Independent Panel on Forestry;
 - b) 22 November 2011 – East of England Local Access Forum Chair and Vice Chair meeting, Cambridge, attended by Bryan Collen (Chair) to raise issues that SLAF have focused on and to develop closer working relationships with other forums;

- c) 20 January 2012 – A11 Dualling, attended by David Barker (Vice Chair) to press case for design of new underpass to accommodate horse riders;
- d) 28 February 2012 – National Local Access Forum Conference, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, attended by Barry Hall;
- e) 28 March 2012 – Independent Panel on Forestry visit to East Anglia. SLAF was represented by Alan Moore. The visit took place at Green Light Trust's offices in Lawshall;
- f) 25 April 2012 – Babergh Green Infrastructure Framework, Sudbury, attended by Cllr Jane Storey; and
- g) 28 May 2012 – Local Nature Partnerships, National Trust Ickworth House, attended by Melinda Appleby.

Presentations

41. SLAF received presentations on:
- a) 20 October 2011 – Local Nature Partnerships, Gen Broad, Biodiversity Officer for Suffolk;
 - b) 12 January 2012 – Rights of Way Crossings on Railway Lines, Steve Day, Liability Negotiations Advisor, Network Rail;
 - c) 12 January 2012 – Future of Public Forest Estate, Mike Taylor, Forestry Commission;
 - d) 12 April 2012 – Natural England presentation on Coastal Access, Huddle and Paths for Communities provided by Lynda Foster, Natural England; and
 - e) 12 July 2012 – Natural England presentation on use of Huddle on-line forum, provided by Anna Mangini, Regional Local Access Forum Coordinator.

Site Visits

- 42. 12 April 2012 – Orford Quay, to see pilot scheme on sea wall to address erosion on a sea defence which carries a public footpath.
- 43. 12 April 2012 – Southwold, to see development of a new bridleway adjacent to a river wall to provide a route for cyclists travelling between Southwold and Walberswick.
- 44. 12 July 2012 – Ipswich Waterfront to see issues regarding public access along quayside.

Training

- 45. 26 January 2012 – Huddle. Margaret Hancock attended training on the use of Huddle, an on-line resource for Local Access Forum members provided by DEFRA and administered by Natural England. Training was provided by the Regional Local Access Forum Coordinator at Constantine House, Ipswich.

Membership of SLAF

- 46. During the past year there have been four meetings, all of which were very well attended.

47. DEFRA guidance advises Local Access Forum membership can be between 10 and 22 members.
48. At the start of this year SLAF membership was 16 members. One member resigned during the year and six members renewed. Membership currently stands at 15 members.
49. A full membership list for 2011/12 is provided in Appendix B.

Looking Ahead

50. The practice of making site visits to complement meeting agendas, meet key partners and see issues relating to access in situ 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) Severance of public access along rights of way by road and rail networks;
 - c) The future of the Public Forest Estate and preserving and enhancing public access;
 - d) The recognition of public access in the policies and development plans of other organisations; and
 - e) The development of the Definitive Map.

Main Recommendations for Suffolk County Council to consider are:

52. The Suffolk Local Access Forum welcomes the continued support given by Suffolk County Council to public rights of way and countryside access. The forum stress upon the council the importance of access for providing sustainable travel options, helping the rural economy and tourism and providing physical and mental health benefits. The forum reiterate that investing in public rights of way and access, in maintaining the network, making small scale improvements and promoting access, provides value for money with modest expenditure reaping considerable benefits to the public and boosting the tourism offer of the county.
53. The forum is pleased that the Highways Agency has backed down on its proposal to reduce the height of the bridleway underpass on the A11 dualling designs and thereby retain full height, providing access between rights of way and areas of open access either side of the A11. However, the forum remains greatly concerned that severance of rights of way by railways and trunk roads elsewhere in the county is not being adequately addressed. The forum urges the Council to press Network Rail and the Highways Agency to seek suitable solutions to severance, where possible.
54. The forum welcomed the formation of the Independent Panel on Forestry to advise government on the future of the Public Forest Estate. The forum broadly welcomed the Independent Panel on Forestry vision for the future of forests and woodlands in England. However, the forum was disappointed the panel did not take the opportunity to propose the dedication of higher rights of access to meet the need of equestrians and cyclists. The forum has expressed this view to MPs.

55. The Suffolk Local Access Forum is keen that countryside access is protected, maintained and enhanced across Suffolk, and welcomed their involvement in developing a green infrastructure strategy for Babergh District Council and their future involvement in the Suffolk and Norfolk local nature partnership 'Wild Anglia'.
56. The Suffolk Local Access Forum recognise the importance of developing the Definitive Map to be responsive to customer's needs and requests the Council to continue supporting this area and maintaining the ability to extinguish, divert and create public rights of way where needed.
57. 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 2012

Suffolk Local Access Forum – Members Details

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. Renewed membership in July 2012.

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. Renewed membership in July 2012.

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 the RSPB, Suffolk Wildlife Trust and National Trust.

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 Portfolio Holder for a Fairer and Greener Ipswich 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 worked 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. Mary resigned from SLAF in 2012 due to relocating with a change in employment.

Monica Pipe – Monica farms just north of Ipswich and has many well-used footpaths on her land including the promoted Fynn Valley Walk. Renewed membership in July 2012.

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. Renewed membership in July 2012.

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. Renewed membership in July 2012.

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. Renewed membership in July 2012.