

Committee:	Cabinet
Meeting Date:	10 September 2013
Lead Councillor/s:	Councillor Graham Newman
Local Councillor/s:	All Councillors
Director:	Lucy Robinson, Director Economy, Skills and Environment
Assistant Director or Head of Service:	Alan Thorndyke, Head of Highway Network Management
Author:	David Falk, Telephone: 01473 264752

Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report August 2012 - July 2013

What is the Cabinet being asked to decide?

1. The Cabinet is asked to accept the 2012/13 annual report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum (SLAF) (Appendix A) and to note the report's recommendations and the action that the Council is taking to address these recommendations.

Reason for recommendation

2. The Suffolk Local Access Forum is required by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to submit an annual report on rights of way and access matters to the Council. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs guidance states: "We would expect the authority to respond positively to the forum's annual report and to say what actions they have taken on the advice and recommendations of the forum."

What are the key issues to consider?

3. The key issues raised by the Suffolk Local Access Forum 2012/13 report are as follows:
 - a) The forum supports the development of a Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Suffolk and considers that countryside access should play a key role in delivering many of the strategy's objectives through investment in countryside access, raising awareness and supporting events.

SCC response: The Council recognise the role of countryside access within the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and will support access, where appropriate, within the strategy's action plans.
 - b) The forum are concerned that pressure to increase rail speeds compromises countryside access and urge the council to continue pressing Network Rail to investigate alternative options to closing rights of way crossings, where practical.

SCC response: The Council remain committed to the development of the rail network for the economic benefit of Suffolk but are equally aware of the need and importance of retaining effective access to the countryside for the benefit of all users.

- c) The Suffolk Local Access Forum is keen to see the Definitive Map of public rights of way in Suffolk made available online to meet the needs of users of the network.

SCC response: the Council will look at opportunities to make the Definitive Map available online.

- d) The Suffolk Local Access Forum attaches importance to maintaining investment in countryside access and requests the council commits to maintain an effective and efficient service to manage the county's public rights of way network and open access sites.

SCC response: The Council acknowledges the importance of countryside access in meeting many of its objectives, including the Most Active County, and commits to supporting the service.

- e) The Suffolk Local Access Forum provides a statutory advisory service to the Council by raising issues regarding countryside access and public rights of way related to leisure, health and sustainable travel.

SCC response: The Council acknowledges the cost-effectiveness and efficiency of the Suffolk Local Access Forum and its focus on key issues regarding countryside access and the use of public rights of way.

- 4. The priorities for SLAF over the coming year include:

- f) Ensuring that countryside access is recognised and becomes a key feature in Health and Wellbeing Strategy Action Plans;
- g) Ensuring that rights of way severance by road or rail are addressed effectively to maintain an efficient rights of way network;
- h) Seeing the Definitive Map made available online;
- i) Seeing the underpass on the A11 opened and promoted for use;
- j) Responding to the development of EDF Sizewell C and pressing for enhanced countryside access.

What are the resource and risk implications?

- 5. The Suffolk Local Access Forum considers that the Council should maintain an effective level of funding for rights of way and access maintenance and improvement. The Director for Economy, Skills and Environment will consider and discuss with the Cabinet Member for Roads and Transport the appropriate level of Suffolk County Council funding for the public rights of way and access network in looking at the priorities for Council revenue and capital budgets, recognising the contribution to healthy and sustainable communities and the benefits to the rural economy that these can provide.

What are the timescales associated with this decision?

- 6. Not applicable.

Alternative options

7. Cabinet could change the responses given by Suffolk County Council to the recommendations from the Suffolk Local Access Forum, or could suggest additional issues that it would like the forum to explore over the coming year.

Who will be affected by this decision?

8. Officers acting on these recommendations and potentially users of public rights of way, land managers and communities within Suffolk.

Sources of Further Information

- a) Suffolk Local Access Forum web pages:
<http://publicrightsofway.onesuffolk.net/suffolk-local-access-forum/>
- b) The Suffolk Rights of Way Improvement Plan:
<http://publicrightsofway.onesuffolk.net/home/rights-of-way-improvement-plan/>

Suffolk Local Access Forum

Annual Report – August 2012 – July 2013

Introduction

1. As required by the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2002 I have pleasure in submitting the tenth 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 public rights of way and countryside access. It is also a statutory consultee for Natural England on mapping of open access land and plans and policies produced by a wide range of organisations, including Defra, Highways Agency and Network Rail.
3. Suffolk County Council's Rights of Way and Access team administer the forum.
4. The forum is made up of individuals with an interest in rights of way and countryside access including members of community organisations, users (walkers, cyclists, horse riders), landowners and land managers, and those with conservation interests.
5. Full membership of SLAF for the period August 2012 – July 2013 is listed in Appendix B.

The Work of SLAF

6. In 2012-2013 the forum has discussed and responded to a wide range of issues arising from consultations, presentations, papers and reports. Responses in this period have been made to Suffolk Health and Wellbeing Board, Defra, Natural England, Ministry of Defence, Highways Agency, Network Rail, EDF (Sizewell C), Ipswich Borough Council and Forest Heath District Council.
7. Members of SLAF have attended local and regional meetings and national conferences.
8. Members of the public are welcome to attend SLAF meetings and have the opportunity to raise items or comment on issues discussed or related to countryside access.
9. Local parish councils are advised of SLAF meetings in their area and are invited to attend.

Administering SLAF

10. SLAF are administered by SCC with officers from Rights of Way and Access providing secretariat functions.
11. The Forum retain their own identity to be clearly recognisable as an independent body with their own letter heading with PO address, an independent email address and a dedicated website on the One Suffolk platform - <http://publicrightsofway.onesuffolk.net/suffolk-local-access-forum>

12. The cost to SCC for administering SLAF for 2012-13 was approximately £1,100. This included venue hire for meetings and refreshments, and member travel expenses. To place this in context, the overall budget for Rights of Way and Access is £1.2M.

Investment in Rights of Way and Countryside Access

13. Given the importance the forum attaches to maintaining investment in countryside access, it supports and welcomes efforts by officers to deliver improvements to public rights of way. Specifically, the forum congratulates officers on the completion of the Sailors Path project, the delivery of a new footpath at Aldeburgh Golf Club, and the delivery of the Lark Valley Path project. The forum also acknowledges the work of officers in dealing with the thousands of maintenance and definitive map queries received over the period of the annual report.
14. The forum is keen that opportunities to develop countryside access are taken, where appropriate. The Brecks Partnerships' Heritage Lottery Fund bid "Breaking New Ground", offers the opportunity to develop countryside access and the forum has written to support two countryside access bids from SCC officers. These are to improve access along the Lark Valley Path and develop a long-distance cycle route between West Stow and Brandon.
15. The forum is committed to providing safer cycling opportunities and so welcomes the success of SCC officers in securing significant funding from the Department of Transport Cycle Safety Fund. This will provide a safe cycle route along rights of way between Mildenhall and West Row (£200k), and a cycle bridge linking public rights of way in Bury St Edmunds (£2m).

Health and Wellbeing

16. The forum welcomes the development of "A Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Suffolk" and shares the Health and Wellbeing Board's vision for people in Suffolk to live healthier and happier lives.
17. The forum considers that countryside access makes a positive contribution to Suffolk's ambition to become England's "Most Active County" and therefore should be a key element in the Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
18. Within the strategy, countryside access has specific relevance to a number of Key Measures (Indicators). The forum considers that developing and promoting countryside access can offer a low cost approach in meeting those measures.
19. The forum requests the Health and Wellbeing Board to consider improving and promoting countryside access when making decisions on Health and Wellbeing priorities for Suffolk, including joint commissioning, spending public money and developing Annual Action Plans.
20. The Forum would like to ensure that those Key Measures (Indicators) that relate to green space, focus not only on managed green spaces (such as town and country parks), but also includes the natural environment accessible on public rights of way and through Open Access Land.
21. In developing Annual Action Plans, the Forum requests the Board to recognise the role public rights of way can play in providing safe routes to schools, services and facilities.

Rights of Way Severance

22. Following its persistent call for adequate bridleway underpass provision, the Forum has been kept advised by the Highways Agency of progress of the A11 dualling at Barton Mills. The forum looks forward to visiting works in autumn 2013. Members consider this underpass to be a major achievement for the forum. When completed, the underpass will enable visitors to the area to enjoy an off-road network of public rights of way extending over 25km between West Stow and Brandon.
23. The forum has expressed concern to Network Rail on a national initiative to address high risk crossing on the rail infrastructure. In Suffolk this has resulted in pressure to close or divert rights of way crossings, when alternative measures could mitigate issues. These include changing approaches, improving decking, clearing trackside vegetation, adding warning lights, or installing grade separated crossings.

Definitive Map

24. SLAF would like to see the Definitive Map of public rights of way for Suffolk made available online through the Suffolk County Council website. This will enable members of the public to view the map and identify with certainty which routes have legal rights for access.
25. The Definitive Map is available in neighbouring counties, including Essex, where it can be viewed as an “interactive map” on OS mapping. The benefit of this is that the public rights of way are depicted on their legal alignment, which can differ to that depicted by OS. This benefits users when providing feedback to SCC on the rights of way network.

Other Issues

26. **Open Access:** The forum was consulted by Natural England (NE) on Open Access Restrictions. The forum supported the lifting of seasonal restrictions at Horn Heath. Horn Heath sits alongside the route of the dualled A11, with site access near the location of the new bridleway underpass. The forum was pleased NE agreed to lift restrictions due to the absence of threatened bird species, as per policy.
27. **Coastal Access:** The forum has followed the development of Coastal Access with keen interest and in the lessons learned by Norfolk County Council with specific regard to diversions around private property and how far inland routes go. 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.
28. **“Wild Anglia”:** The forum has expressed concern about how access will be represented in the new Local Nature Partnership “Wild Anglia”. The concern centres on access being overshadowed by conservation interests. The forum have requested that access is represented effectively in the board of “Wild Anglia” and within working groups.
29. **The future of the Public Forest Estate in England:** The forum was an active contributor to the debate on the future of forestry and woodlands in England, and met the independent panel on forestry when it visited Suffolk in March last year. The forum was broadly supportive of the Government’s response to the panel’s final report in February this year that it shares the

panel's vision for the future of our forests and that the Public Forest Estate will remain in public ownership.

30. **Ipswich Northern Fringe:** The forum expressed concern to Ipswich Borough Council on the large scale development proposed in the north of Ipswich. The Forum lobbied for the need to protect and enhance the Fonneraeu Way and ensure safe links were made between the development, rail stations, schools, managed green space, Ipswich and the wider rights of way network.
31. **Ipswich-Alton Water Cycle Link:** The forum has written to Ipswich Borough Council to express concern over the failure to secure a bridleway link between Ipswich and Alton Water. This link would connect Belstead and Sustrans cycle routes, to the cycle network at Alton Water, providing a near continuous safe, off-road route.
32. **Communication between Local Access Forums:** The Forum wishes to maintain good contact with neighbouring LAFs where there are shared interests such as level crossing closures along Greater Anglia's routes and access to the Public Forest Estate at Thetford Forest. The Forum welcomes the recruitment of a regional coordinator to disseminate information and provide communication between the Forum and Natural England. Forum members have not signed up to use the online resource provided by Natural England 'Huddle' partly due to issues with broadband speeds in rural Suffolk.

Consultations

33. SLAF has been consulted on:
 - a) A Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Suffolk;
 - b) Triennial Review of Environment Agency and Natural England;
 - c) DEFRA / Independent Panel on Forestry;
 - d) Review of Open Access Site Restrictions;
 - e) Natural England Dedication of Higher Rights on National Nature Reserves;
 - f) MOD Open Access Sites;
 - g) Suffolk Biodiversity Partnership;
 - h) Forest Heath Dog Control Order (SLAF had no objection to the order to control dogs on Aspal Close Local Nature Reserve);
 - i) Gating Order, Felixstowe (SLAF had no objection to the extension of a gating order to control Anti-Social Behaviour).

Meetings

34. SLAF have held meetings on:
 - a) 18 October 2012 – Town Hall, Beccles;
 - b) 24 January 2013 – West Suffolk House, Bury St Edmunds;
 - c) 18 April 2013 – Great Blakenham Village Hall;
 - d) 11 July 2013 – Assington Village Hall.
35. SLAF members have attended meetings on:

- a) 4 October 2012 – The Suffolk Coast and Estuaries Community Conference 2012, Thorpness Country Club, attended by Bryan Collen (Chair). This meeting related to coastal erosion and was of interest to SLAF regarding coastal access and the development by Natural England of a Coastal Path;
- b) 24 October 2012 – Open Access Restrictions, Natural England teleconference, Endeavour House, attended by Barry Hall and Gordon Merfield. At this meeting seasonal Directions that restrict access on sites with ground nesting birds was discussed with interested partners including conservation groups, landowners and users;
- c) 15 November 2012 – LAF Chairs and Vice Chairs East of England Meeting, Kings Cross, London, attended by Bryan Collen (Chair). Regional LAFs met with Natural England officers to raise issues relating to access;
- d) 23 November 2012 – A11 Fiveways to Thetford Improvement Scheme Public Information Exhibition, Elveden Village Hall, Elveden, attended by David Barker (Vice Chair);
- e) 27 February 2013 – LAF National Conference, Sheffield, attended by Barry Hall. Representatives of 73 LAFs (89%) attended the conference to learn from and meet other LAFs and participate in workshops;
- f) 23 July 2013 – Stour and Orwell Estuaries Forum 2013, Wherstead, attended by Barry Hall.

Presentations

36. SLAF received presentations on:

- a) 18 October 2012 – Coastal Access, Carrie Kerry, Norfolk County Council;
- b) 18 October 2012 – Angles Way Project, Carrie Kerry, Norfolk County Council;
- c) 24 January 2013 – Issues Affecting a Walk in the Countryside, Sharon Berry, Public Rights of Way Officer, Mid-Suffolk District Council. This presentation concerned the physical and psychological barriers that affect people accessing the countryside;
- d) 24 January 2013 – Countryside Access and Health, Saraid Cann, Professional Advisor, Adult and Community Services, SCC. This presentation focused on the role that countryside access can play in enhancing the health and wellbeing of a community;
- e) 18 April 2013 – Quiet Lanes, Neil Winship, Parish Councillor Waldringfield, SALC Representative on Suffolk Coast & Heaths AONB Partnership Committee.
- f) 18 April 2013 – SCC Natural Environment, Nick Collinson, SCC Natural Environment Manager. This presentation introduced Nick Collinson to the forum to explain his new role and how it relates to the role of SLAF;
- g) 11 July 2013 – East of England Local Access Forums, Michelle Gardiner, Regional LAF Coordinator. This was an opportunity for the new regional coordinator to meet members and explain her role.

Membership of SLAF

37. SLAF membership throughout this year has been 15 members.
38. A full membership list for 2012/13 is in Appendix B.

Looking Ahead

39. The practice of meeting key partners and seeing issues relating to access in situ will continue.
40. The priorities for SLAF over the coming year include:
 - a) Ensuring that countryside access is recognised and becomes a key feature in Health and Wellbeing Strategy Action Plans;
 - b) Ensuring that rights of way severance by road or rail are addressed effectively to maintain an efficient rights of way network;
 - c) Seeing the Definitive Map made available online;
 - d) Seeing the underpass on the A11 opened and promoted for use;
 - e) Responding to the development of EDF Sizewell C and pressing for enhanced countryside access;

Main Recommendations for Suffolk County Council to consider are:

41. The forum supports the development of a Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Suffolk and considers that countryside access should play a key role in delivering many of the strategy's objectives through investment in countryside access, raising awareness and supporting events.
42. The forum are concerned that pressure to increase rail speeds compromises countryside access and urge the council to continue pressing Network Rail to investigate alternative options to closing rights of way crossings, where practical.
43. The Suffolk Local Access Forum is keen to see the Definitive Map of public rights of way in Suffolk made available online to meet the needs of users of the network.
44. The Suffolk Local Access Forum attaches importance to maintaining investment in countryside access and requests the council commits to maintain an effective and efficient service to manage the county's public rights of way network and open access sites.
45. The Suffolk Local Access Forum provides a statutory advisory service to the Council by raising issues regarding countryside access and public rights of way related to leisure, health and sustainable travel.

Bryan Collen

Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

David Barker

Vice Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

July 2013

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.

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 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. Cllr Martin stepped down from SLAF in July 2013.

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.

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.