

Cabinet

Report Title:	Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report 2017/18
Meeting Date:	11th September 2018
Lead Councillor(s):	Councillor Mary Evans
Local Councillor(s):	All Councillors
Director:	Aidan Dunn, Interim Corporate Director for Growth Highways and Infrastructure
Assistant Director or Head of Service:	Mark Stevens, Assistant Director Operational Highways
Author:	David Falk, Green Access Manager

Brief summary of report

- As required by the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2002 I have pleasure in submitting the fifteenth Annual Report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum (SLAF) to Suffolk County Council as the highway authority. SLAF acts as an independent body to advise the Council on matters relating to 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. This report is a summary of SLAF activities between August 2017 and July 2018.

What is Cabinet being asked to decide?

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The Cabinet is asked to accept the 2017/18 Annual Report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum and to note the report's recommendations and the action that the Council is taking to address these recommendations. |
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Reason for recommendation

- 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 the Department 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?

4. The key issues raised by the Suffolk Local Access Forum 2017/18 report are as follows:

- a) **Investment** – As reported in previous years the forum believes rights of way and countryside access are of significant importance in contributing to the successful and sustainable delivery of Council Priorities, specifically 2017-2021 priorities of: inclusive growth; health care and wellbeing; and efficient and effective public services. The forum believes rights of way and countryside access also support the priorities and efforts of Public Health and the Most Active County programme, the activities of the counties' Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), the role of the counties 2 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), and the Greenest County agenda. The Suffolk Local Access Forum would like the authority to recognise the importance of "green" access and retain appropriate levels of investment in public rights of way as an efficient and effective use of public funds to maintain use of this service.

The forum stresses the importance of maintaining specific strategic links. This includes the Bailey Bridge connecting Southwold Harbour with Walberswick, which at a site visit on 26th July 2018 to hear about the England Coast Path, members were advised requires an expensive inspection.

The forum also stresses the importance of the authority maximising benefits from the planning process in securing funds and commitments to enhance the rights of way and access network.

Response: The Council recognises the role that green access plays in meeting Council priorities as detailed above. It recognises its impact on enabling and encouraging more active and healthy lifestyles and more resilient communities. It recognises that green access supports sustainable travel options and enhances the county's tourism offer and will endeavour to maintain appropriate levels of funding to support front line use of this service.

- b) **Network Rail (NR)** – Last year's annual report identified SLAF's strong concerns over the policy by Network Rail to close rights of way level crossings with the view these threaten equality of access, potentially excluding significant sections of the population from accessing the countryside. SLAF were very pleased to be able to give evidence at the public inquiry into the Suffolk Transport and Works Act Order on 16th March 2018 and present their objection to the closure of 10 crossings. SLAF believe this demonstrates again their value to the county council, who of course were also objectors to the order. The forum support officers' efforts with specific regard to crossings in Newmarket, Needham Market and Felixstowe.

Response: The Council welcome and support SLAFs efforts in this area and share their keenness to maintain effective public access for non-motorised users and will continue to seek solutions to rights of way level

crossings to the benefit of all concerned. The council is especially appreciative of SLAFs involvement in the Suffolk (TWAO) public inquiry.

- c) **The England Coast Path:** SLAF see the delivery of The England Coast Path and its status as a national trail, as an important opportunity to promote tourism in Suffolk and will continue to work closely with SCC on ensuring the trail creates an excellent visitor experience.

SLAF also supports the discussions officers are having with Essex and Norfolk County Councils to promote and manage a regional coast path which should add value to the path. SLAF's main concern is that Natural England should include estuaries in the trail, which should not be reliant on seasonal and sometimes unreliable ferries.

Response: The Council recognises the opportunities the England Coast Path brings to Suffolk and are committed to work with partners to ensure it delivers the best experience for all users of it.

- d) **The Suffolk Local Access Forum** provides a cost effective statutory advisory service to the Council and other organisations by raising issues regarding public rights of way and countryside access.

Response: The Council acknowledges the cost-effectiveness, efficiency and important role performed by the Suffolk Local Access Forum with its focus on countryside access and recognise the experience and expertise the forum offers in relation to health and wellbeing, communities, sustainable travel, tourism and the rural economy.

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 Interim Corporate Director for Growth Highways and Infrastructure will consider and discuss with the Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Rural Affairs 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.

Main body of report

9. The Work of SLAF

The forum met at quarterly intervals during 2017/18 to discuss a wide range of issues that had arisen from consultations, presentations, papers, reports and site visits. Meetings were as follows:

19th October 2017 – SALC Offices, Claydon

18th January 2018 – Brandon Country Park, Brandon

26th April 2018 – Phoenix House, Ipswich

26th July 2018 – Walberswick Village Hall, Walberswick

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. Local parish councils are alerted to SLAF meetings in their area and invited to attend. A full list of members is in Appendix A.

10. Administering SLAF

The SLAF is an independent body with its own letter heading and PO address box, an independent email address and a dedicated page on One Suffolk; <http://www.suffolkpublicrightsofway.org.uk/suffolk-local-access-forum/>

11. Suffolk County Council's Rights of Way and Access team administers the forum. The cost for servicing SLAF for 2017-18 was approximately £1,500. This includes secretariat services, hire of meeting rooms, site visits and member travel expenses. The cost has remained static for the past 8 years and is excellent value.

12. SLAF Activities in 2017/18

a) Network Rail (NR)

Last year's annual report identified SLAF's strong concerns over the policy by Network Rail to close rights of way level crossings with the view these threaten equality of access, potentially excluding significant sections of the population from accessing the countryside. SLAF were very pleased to be able to give evidence at the public inquiry into the Suffolk Transport and Works Act Order on 16th March 2018 and present their objection to the closure of 10 crossings. SLAF believe this demonstrates again their value to the county council, who of course were also objectors to the order. The forum support officer's efforts with specific regard to crossings in Newmarket, Needham Market and Felixstowe.

b) The England Coast Path

Natural England are currently working on delivering The England Coast Path in Suffolk. SLAF is very engaged with this work and members attended

a site visit with Natural England to hear of progress and issues delivering the path. SLAF are interested in the tourism benefits of a new path and the opportunity for an East England Coast Path through East Anglia. However, SLAF are very concerned over whether estuaries are included in the Path and that the route is not truncated at key points. SLAF will continue to advocate an estuarine trail with Natural England. A key concern relates to the River Blyth and the Bailey Bridge which connects Southwold Harbour with Walberswick and forms a strategic link for the Sandlings Walk, the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Path and potentially The England Coast Path. The bridge is due for an inspection at a cost of £25k and SLAF are very concerned at the financial impact of this inspection and are concerned over the long-term viability of this crossing.

c) Rights of Way Improvement Plan

SLAF support the work of officers in developing a new strategic plan for countryside access. Rights of Way Improvement Plans are a statutory requirement for highway authorities and Suffolk's plan is due to be launched in 2018/19. The plan will focus on how green access will be developed in Suffolk with attention to securing funding for access improvements, enabling communities to be more active in developing green access, and promoting countryside access and the use of the access network through such initiatives as the Suffolk Walking Festival.

d) Review of Open Access Restrictions

Open Access is land where the public have a right to roam. Nationally this includes areas of mountain, moorland, down and heath. In Suffolk this includes two areas of heathland: the Sandlings along the coast between Ipswich and Southwold; and the Brecks, north of Bury St Edmunds towards the Norfolk border. Where there are protected species, specifically ground nesting birds, these areas carry seasonal restrictions when the public are not allowed access. SLAF are consultees on deciding these restrictions which meet nationally agreed criteria based on nesting sites. SLAF fully support efforts by Natural England and other partners to protect the landscape for rare species but at the same time see educating the public on the relevance of such sites very important and encourage the authority to promote Suffolk's countryside effectively and where necessary challenge restrictions if they do not meet the criteria.

e) DEFRA's Report on the Future for Food, Farming and the Environment

DEFRA's report is a first step towards a new Agriculture Bill that will form the basis of the UK's post-Brexit agriculture and environment policy. SLAF welcomed the opportunity to comment on the report. SLAF believes the report should be bolder, especially in terms of joining up habitats and providing access for health, wellbeing and enjoyment benefits. There is

concern over urban access to the countryside which is particularly important and should be supported. Changes to the public rights of way network where the highway authority agrees there is an overall public benefit to access, should be supported through payments, payments should also be made to remove barriers on public rights of way and to improve surfaces, and payments should be made available where land managers can add value to the access network, managing public rights of way and creating new public and open access.

f) LAF Regional Meeting

SLAF welcomed the return of a regional LAF meeting where the chair was able to meet chairs and vice chairs of other LAFs in the east of England. This meeting allowed the exchange of priorities between LAFs and helped identify common ground where LAFs could work together, such as on rail level crossings, the England Coast Path and DEFRA's Report on the Future of Food, Farming and the Environment.

g) Sizewell C

SLAF welcomed officers alerting EDF to member's wish for full involvement at stage 3 consultation and look forward to receiving further updates at their October 2018 meeting from EDF Energy.

h) 2018 Suffolk Walking Festival

SLAF were delighted to hear about this year's Suffolk Walking Festival and are impressed with the momentum this event has created. They were especially impressed that an economic impact assessment of the event (Cambridge Model) estimated an economic impact of £176k into Suffolk's economy, that 49% of participants were enthused to increase their levels of activity and that the event has become a pan-Suffolk partnership of authorities, health organisations and conservation bodies drawing in sponsorship and support across the county.

i) Consultations

1. Natural England Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act Restrictions on Open Access land
2. DEFRA The Future for Food, Farming and the Environment
3. RSPB Woodland Management

j) Conference/Training/Meetings/Site Visits:

SLAF members have attended the following conferences, training sessions, meetings or site visits this year:

1. 17th November 2017 – The England Coast Path public consultation Woodbridge Library
2. 30th November 2017 – The England Coast Path public consultation Hollesley Village Hall

3. 21st June 2018 – East of England Local Access Forum Chair and Vice Chair Meeting
4. 18th July 2018 – Norfolk Local Access Forum
5. 26th July 2018 – Walberswick and Southwold Harbour to hear from Natural England about the delivery of the England Coast Path and from officers on issues related to the Bailey Bridge on the River Blyth which connects Walberswick and Southwold Harbour.

k) Working Groups:

The forum has the following working groups:

Topic	Membership
Network Rail	Barry Hall, Roley Wilson, Diana Kearsley
Sizewell C	Barry Hall Anthony Wright, Roley Wilson
Forests and Woodlands	Gordon Merfield, Anthony Wright, Jane Hatton
Open Access	Barry Hall, Gordon Merfield,
ROWIP	Roley Wilson, Jane Hatton, Diana Kearsley, Monica Pipe
Coastal Erosion and Access	Roley Wilson, Barry Hall
Planning and Development	Jane Storey, Jane Hatton, Anthony Wright
Agri-Environment Schemes	David Barker, John Wayman

12. Looking Ahead

Priorities for SLAF over the coming year include:

- a. **Investment in Public Rights of Way** – to see that investment in the public rights of way network and countryside access meet the needs of an increasing and ageing population and ensure that all members of society benefit from being able to visit and enjoy Suffolk’s countryside.
- b. **Network Rail** – to continue working with officers and Network Rail to ensure that rights of way level crossings are not closed as a first option, but that careful consideration is given to alternative solutions that meet the needs of all members of society.
- c. **The England Coast Path** – to continue to liaise with officers and Natural England to contribute to the development, management and promotion of a new regional coastal path. To ensure as far as possible the trail follows estuaries with all the additional benefits that will bring, especially to local communities.
- d. **Sizewell C** – to use the stage 3 consultation to press for the best outcome for public access during construction, and a high quality, long-lasting legacy to the development.

- e. **SLAF Recruitment** – SLAF are keen to recruit up to 5 new members to bring total membership to 16 and expand on the current spread of knowledge, experience and expertise. SLAF are especially keen to see new members with a strong background in health and wellbeing, and accessibility.
- f. **Rights of Way Improvement Plan** – SLAF are keen to see the publication of the ROWIP and the emphasis on maintaining and developing infrastructure, developing communities and enhanced promotion of the rights of way and access network.
- g. **Development** – to raise awareness by local planning authorities to both protecting and enhancing public rights of way both on and off site.

Barry Hall

Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

David Barker

Vice Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

September 2018

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/>
- c) Local Access Forums:
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-access-forums-participate-in-decisions-on-public-access>

Suffolk Local Access Forum – Members Details

SLAF Membership July 2018

Barry Hall (Chair) – 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. *Barry has been a member of SLAF since October 2007 and Chair since January 2016.*

David Barker (Vice Chair) – With his wide experience within the NFU, CLA and as a former Countryside Agency commissioner, David seeks to work to balance all interests in countryside access. David is also Chair of Creating the Greenest County. *David has been a member of SLAF since July 2003 and Vice Chair since April 2010.*

Margaret Hancock A Blue Badge Tourist Guide particularly interested in promoting sustainable tourism. Keen to encourage visitors to explore Suffolk by public transport, walking and cycling to benefit the local economy and preserve the peace and tranquillity of the county. Experience of supporting children and young people with disabilities, enabling them to access leisure facilities. *Margaret has been a member of SLAF since April 2010.*

Jane Hatton – A horse rider since a child, Jane was born and brought up in Suffolk enjoying the countryside both as a keen horse rider and dog walker. Jane has a background in Sales and Marketing and works for Intelligent Health. *Jane has been a member of SLAF since October 2013.*

Cllr Diana Kearsley – With a keen interest in wildlife and preserving Suffolk, Diana has specific responsibilities for community issues and is also a member of the 'Development Control' committee for Mid Suffolk District Council. *Cllr Diana Kearsley has been a member of SLAF since October 2013.*

Gordon Merfield – With a background in agriculture, since the 1980's Gordon has been active in participating and coaching field sports events as well as being interested in the wider countryside and walking in foreign countries. *Gordon has been a member of SLAF since September 2004.*

Monica Pipe – Monica farms just north of Ipswich and has many well-used footpaths on her land including the promoted Fynn Valley Walk. *Monica has been a member of SLAF since July 2003.*

Councillor Jane Storey – SCC Councillor for Thedwastre North, Jane's interests include walking, dog-walking, off-road driving and, being a farmer's daughter, a strong view that along with rights come responsibilities. Jane believes that we should preserve our rights of way, including byways 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. *Cllr Jane Storey has been a member of SLAF since October 2009.*

John Wayman – A former district council member farming in the Stour Valley, John now contributes to the wider rural picture. *John has been a member of SLAF since July 2003.*

Roley Wilson – Roley is actively involved in the promotion of the health benefits of walking for all. He has a lifelong interest in nature and open-air pursuits. During a 33-year police career one of his many postings involved being the Wildlife Liaison Officer for Suffolk. He is a member of the Ramblers and since retirement has spent an increasing amount of time in volunteer activities for that organisation. A keen bird watcher and member of the RSPB and Suffolk Wildlife Trust he has a passion for ensuring that everyone has free and responsible access to the countryside. *Roley has been a member of SLAF since October 2013.*

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. *Anthony has been a member of SLAF since July 2003.*