

## Cabinet

<b>Report Title:</b>	Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report 2020/21
<b>Meeting Date:</b>	12 October 2021
<b>Lead Councillor(s):</b>	Councillor Paul West, Cabinet Member for Ipswich, Operational Highways and Flooding
<b>Local Councillor(s):</b>	All Councillors
<b>Director:</b>	Mark Ash, Executive Director of Growth, Highways and Infrastructure
<b>Assistant Director or Head of Service:</b>	Steve Palfrey, Assistant Director, Waste and Environment
<b>Author:</b>	David Falk, Green Access Manager, 07843 467 964, david.falk@suffolk.gov.uk

### Brief summary of report

- Local Access Forums are independent bodies established by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The forum’s role is to advise the Council on matters relating to rights of way and countryside access. They are also statutory consultees to other organisations including Network Rail, Highways England and Natural England.

Members represent a range of interests, and all are volunteers. Each forum reports to their relevant appointing authority, which for the Suffolk Local Access Forum (SLAF) is Suffolk County Council (SCC) and under the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2007 (part 13), they are required to submit an Annual Report to that authority.

This is the eighteenth SLAF Annual Report presented to Suffolk County Council, and it provides a summary of their activities between August 2020 and July 2021.

### What is Cabinet being asked to decide?

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Cabinet being is asked to accept the Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report 2020/21 and address the report’s recommendations and state the actions that the Council is taking to address those recommendations.</li> </ol> |
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### Reason for recommendation

- Under the Local Access Forums (England) Regulations 2007, local access forums are required to submit an annual report on rights of way and access matters to their appointing authority. It is a requirement for that authority to publish the report and guidance states that: “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 2020/21 report are as follows:

### **a) Sizewell C:**

The forum remains concerned over the impact the development of Sizewell C will have on the green access network and has pressed Sizewell C to ensure green access is effectively managed during construction and that there is a lasting legacy of improved green access once construction has been completed.

**Response:** The Council is thankful to the forum for its on-going support throughout the consultation process and, if consent for Sizewell C is granted, remains committed to protecting green access during the construction of Sizewell C and pressing for a strong green access legacy after construction.

### **b) Green Energy Schemes:**

The forum is concerned over plans for Sunnica Solar Farm and Scottish Power Friston Sub Station and has emphasised to both the importance of the green access network within and around the sites to the communities living, working and visiting there.

**Response:** The Council welcomes the involvement of the forum in putting pressure on both schemes to acknowledge the importance of the green access network and will work with both projects to mitigate their impact on access and enjoyment of the countryside, should consent for them be granted.

### **c) Severance of the Rights of Way network:**

The forum has pressed Network Rail to address rights of way severance and is concerned over the lack of progress implementing a Transport and Works Act Order and delivering works to improve access in Needham Market. The forum is also keen to see on-going dialogue with National Highways produce positive outcomes for rights of way severed by the county's trunk roads.

**Response:** The Council thanks the forum for their strong support in meetings with Network Rail and National Highways and will continue to work with both organisations to secure positive outcomes for the green access network.

## **How will this impact on the Council's ambitions for carbon reduction?**

5. The Suffolk Local Access Forum's role, activities and recommendations are based on encouraging and enabling a greater use of the green access network and improving that network to benefit sustainable travel choices and healthier lifestyles. This is very relevant to reducing carbon emissions and Suffolk achieving carbon neutrality by 2030.

## **What are the resource and risk implications?**

6. The Suffolk Local Access Forum continues to recognise and support the Council in these times acknowledging there are, and will be, budget pressures in all areas of the Council's work.

7. The forum welcomes the Council's funding of large bridge structures on the rights of way network. The forum also welcomes the significant funding from the Suffolk 2020 Fund for the Discovering Suffolk Project, which will promote outdoor activity through a walking app for Suffolk and the use of QR codes.
8. The forum believes that since the COVID-19 pandemic there is an even greater relevance of the green access network to address health issues, ensure sustainable communities, and support the county's tourism economy.
9. The forum understands that visits to the countryside have increased significantly over the past year and the growing demand for countryside access has put significant additional pressures on managing of the county's access network.
10. The forum asks the Council to continue its positive support of green access in response to these changing habits by ensuring budgets allow for effective management and promotion of the public rights of way network.
11. The Executive Director for Growth Highways and Infrastructure will consider and discuss with the Cabinet Member for Ipswich, Operational Highways and Flooding the appropriate level of Suffolk County Council funding for the public rights of way and green access network when 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 the network provides.
12. An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is not required for the SLAF Annual Report 2020-2021, as advised by the Lead for Equalities and Inclusion.

### **What are the timescales associated with this decision?**

13. Not applicable

### **Alternative options**

14. 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?**

15. Officers acting on these recommendations and potentially users of public rights of way, communities and landowners within Suffolk.

### **Main body of report**

#### **The Work of SLAF**

16. The forum meets quarterly but over the period of this report in-person meetings were not possible due to COVID-19 restrictions. Therefore, meetings were held using Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Those meetings took place on:
  - 29<sup>th</sup> October 2020 – Microsoft Teams.
  - 28<sup>th</sup> January 2021 – Zoom.
  - 29<sup>th</sup> April 2021 – Microsoft Teams.
  - 29<sup>th</sup> July 2021 – Zoom.
17. Meetings are open to the public and members of the public attended each of the above meetings.

18. A full list of members is given in Appendix A.

### **Administering SLAF**

19. There are 13 volunteer members on the forum representing interests in walking, cycling, horse riding, accessibility, conservation, outdoor sport, land management and tourism. Members are recruited following SCC's recruitment process.
20. In addition, there are 2 members of the forum representing the County Council and District Councils, appointed to the forum by SCC Full Council and by the Suffolk Chief Officers Leadership Team, respectively.
21. The forum's independence is reflected in having their own logo, letter heading, email address and page on the Suffolk County Council website at <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way-in-suffolk/suffolk-local-access-forum/>.
22. SCC's Rights of Way and Access team administers the forum, providing secretariat services, booking meeting rooms, providing refreshments, reimbursing travel expenses, arranging site visits and recruiting new members.
23. Due to COVID-19 restrictions preventing site visits or face to face meetings, there was no cost administering the forum in 2020-21.
24. The forum thanks the Rights of Way and Access team for their on-going support, advice and assistance which is vital to the forum performing their duties.

### **SLAF Activities in 2019/20**

#### **Sizewell C**

25. Since the start of consultations on Sizewell C Nuclear Power Station, the forum has had regular presentations from EDF and has welcomed the opportunity for dialogue.
26. The forum has responded to the Second, Third and Fourth consultations and in September 2020 made representations to the Planning Inspectorate in response to the Development Consent Order for the proposed Sizewell C Nuclear Power Station.
27. In August 2021, the forum wrote to the Sizewell Planning Inspectorate to express concern that no hearings had been scheduled to specifically discuss access issues.
28. The forum is concerned over the impact to the local public rights of way network with 26 PROW affected during construction. The forum is concerned that although some of their comments have been taken into account, there are still outstanding issues they feel that need to be addressed by EDF.
29. In December 2020 the forum wrote to the Sizewell C Consultation to support the inclusion of a bridleway link between Aldhurst Farm and Kenton Hills within the Development Consent Order rather than in post-construction funding, the upgrade of a bridleway as part of the two village bypass, and the removal of the

Sizewell B Outage Car Park from Pillbox Field alleviating conflicts with public rights of way.

30. However, the forum remains concerned over proposals for the Permanent Beach Landing Facility, Temporary Beach Landing Facility, changes to the sea defences, and the impact of each on the public rights of way network.
31. The forum accepts the loss of Leiston-Cum-Sizewell Bridleway 19 during the construction period but seeks assurance from EDF that an alternative off-road route is extended to Eastbridge. In addition, the forum seeks assurance that there will be a safe pedestrian link between the B1122 and Sandy Lane. Furthermore, the forum seeks assurance that the route for the England Coast Path is secured to the top of new hard sea defences to safeguard the route against future coastal erosion.
32. The forum accepts new road schemes to mitigate traffic impact for construction traffic but seeks assurances that all rights of way crossings of these roads are subject to a risk assessment audit.
33. Furthermore, the forum understands the significant economic importance of the coastal region to Suffolk and seeks assurances that post construction there is a significant legacy to public access in the wider area with improved links and better off-road routes for walking, cycling and horse riding.

#### **Sunnica Solar Farm**

34. In December 2020, the forum objected to the Sunnica Solar Farm consultation. The forum's objection centred on an unacceptable adverse impact on public rights of way and a lack of sufficient mitigation.
35. The forum wrote to Matthew Hancock MP with their concerns. They also shared their response with Cambridgeshire Local Access Forum who aligned with SLAF.
36. The forum recognises the need for renewable energy, but their concern relates to the loss of good agricultural land, changing a landscape of open countryside with one of solar panels, and the significant adverse impact on views and enjoyment of the countryside.
37. The forum finds proposals for permissive paths to be unacceptable and insists that any development creates public rights of way that accommodate walking, cycling and equestrian use.
38. SLAF insists that any closures of rights of way are minimised and only when essential on safety grounds with sensible alternatives established and the needs of users fully considered.

#### **Scottish Power Friston Sub Station**

39. The forum has been kept updated by SCC officers on proposals for East Anglia 1, East Anglia 2 and Friston Substation, noting the impact the development will have on 26 public rights of way, difficulty over bridleways proposals, and stopping up of rights of way north of Friston. The forum is concerned over the methodology used and conclusions of the Environmental Impact Assessment as it does not address the impact on amenity and quality of user experience on the access network.

### **Environmental Stewardship Scheme**

40. The forum is concerned over the lack of clarity for the post-Brexit Environmental Stewardship scheme and how it will benefit countryside access. The forum sees this as a key area for them to focus on in 2021-22.

### **Network Rail**

41. The forum is concerned at the efficiency with which a Transport and Works Act Order is being implemented, despite its Public Inquiry concluding in May 2018.
42. In addition, the forum is concerned over the lack of progress by Network Rail on closing Gipsy Lane (Needham Market Footpath 6) and bringing into operation a footpath diversion to a new underpass of the rail line.
43. The closure of Gipsy Lane was initially requested in 2015 with works authorised following a Public Inquiry in 2019. In April 2021, the forum wrote to Network Rail Anglia Route Director to state that despite urgency, there had been no progress made on implementing the scheme and the forum insists that a constructive dialogue takes place to resolve issues holding up progress.
44. The forum is pleased that subsequent to writing, Network Rail have produced a work plan, set up a Programme Board and developed a communications strategy for works.
45. The forum is also concerned over Network Rail's Design Standard for replacing existing wooden stiles at rail crossings with metal stiles. The forum wrote to Network Rail to state that the new stiles are difficult to use and expressed the need for stiles to be replaced with gates to ensure the countryside is as accessible as possible for people with limited mobility.

### **Trunk Roads**

46. The forum is a member of the Community and Environmental Stakeholder Reference Group advising Highways England on proposals to develop the Copdock A12/A14 junction. The forum is keen that any development brings improved access on public rights of way between Washbrook, Copdock and Belstead.
47. The forum supports SCC's Rights of Way and Access team in their discussions with Highways England over the severance of the network by Trunk Roads and identifying diversions of rights of way to safe crossings. The forum has requested a presentation from Highways England to understand more about this area of work.
48. The forum is especially keen to see discussions lead to improvements to the public rights of way network at Sproughton and at Trimley St Mary, and for any opportunities to improve the A14/A137 junction at Wherstead to provide improved access between Wherstead and Bourne Hill.

### **The Planning Process**

49. Although the forum is not a statutory consultee to Local Planning Authorities on planning applications, they are keen to learn of larger developments where there could be significant gains for the green access network.
50. SLAF's Planning and Development Working Group met on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2021 to review consultations for Garden Village Sites at Land North of Lowestoft (Corton), South Saxmundham Garden Neighbourhood, and Land West of Mildenhall.
51. In July 2021, the forum received a presentation from the Principal Planning Officer at Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Council on the planning process and key developments within the district.
52. The forum advised the officer that they expect District planners to protect the public rights of way network in the planning process, and that the forum intended to respond to consultations on strategic plans and on larger, significant developments.

### **England Coast Path**

53. The England Coast Path is a new 2,500 mile National Trail around England's coastline. Natural England are tasked with consulting on the alignment of the path.
54. In all communications with Natural England, the forum has pressed the case that in Suffolk the path needs to include access along river estuaries to ensure continuity of the route and avoid reliance on ferry crossings.
55. The forum responded to proposals for the England Coast Path between Bawdsey and Aldeburgh welcoming the inclusion of access around estuaries with new paths providing improved coastal and waterside access.
56. The forum also responded to proposals for the England Coast Path around the Deben Estuary from Felixstowe Ferry to Bawdsey and strongly support the route presented which addresses significant gaps in the existing access network .
57. The forum is pleased that Natural England have agreed a grant application from the Rights of Way and Access Team for a Project Officer to deliver works establishing the new National Trail.
58. Overall, the forum is very pleased that Natural England have responded positively to their case, however, the forum has concerns over the longer term maintenance of the path which will rest with the County Council.

### **Open Access Restrictions**

59. The forum is one of a number of consultees to Natural England on Open Access sites. The forum comments on proposals for dedicating sites and for permitting seasonal restrictions to public access for land management or conservation purposes.
60. The forum considered a new Direction from Natural England on seasonal closures for a site in Euston for land management reasons and the forum had no objection to this Direction.

### **Promoting Countryside Access**

61. The forum sees the promotion of countryside access as important to the health and wellbeing of local communities and promoting Suffolk as an outdoor tourism destination. The forum welcomes the significant funding from the Suffolk 2020 Fund for the Discovering Suffolk project which will create a Suffolk walking app and use QR codes to promote countryside access.
62. Although the Suffolk Walking Festival had to be cancelled for the second year in a row, the forum was delighted it was replaced with the 2021 Virtual Suffolk Walking Festival, offering inspiration for walking across the county.

### **Regional Local Access Forum**

63. A Regional Local Access Forum Meeting was held on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2021 on Zoom and attended by Barry Hall, SLAF Chair, and David Barker, SLAF Vice Chair.
64. In April 2021, SLAF wrote to Natural England expressing serious concern over the gradual withdrawal of support from Natural England to Local Access Forums in East Anglia with the cessation of an annual training event, the ending of hosting Regional LAF Meetings, and no officer within Natural England with responsibility for LAFs. The forum expressed that in these times the link between Natural England and LAFs should be strengthened, not weakened.
65. Another Regional Local Access Forum Meeting was held on 8 July 2021 on Zoom and attended by Barry Hall, SLAF Chair.

### **Norfolk Local Access Forum**

66. The Vice Chair of the Norfolk Local Access Forum suggested a change to SLAF's constitution to allow a reciprocal arrangement where a member of the Norfolk and the Broads LAFs join the Suffolk LAF as non-voting members.
67. The Suffolk Local Access Forum agreed that any cross-border issue of interest to neighbouring LAFs was effectively dealt with at the regional LAF meetings. Those meetings offered a broader scope for issues to be shared and commonality identified across the eastern region. This has proved especially constructive for SLAF on issues relating to Network Rail, Highways England and cross-border planning proposals.
68. The forum emphasised that members of other LAFs were always very welcome to join SLAF's quarterly meetings and they were always invited to raise any issue that may be of mutual interest.

### **SLAF Membership**

69. In June 2020, following local elections, Councillor Jane Storey (formerly Thedwastre North Ward) stood down from the forum. A new county council representative will be appointed in due course.



### **Working Groups:**

70. The forum has the following working groups:

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Membership</b>
PRoW Severance, including Network Rail and Highways England	Barry Hall, Clare Philips, Roley Wilson
Sizewell C	Suzanne Bartlett, Barry Hall, Roley Wilson, Anthony Wright
Open Access	Barry Hall, Gordon Merfield
Coastal Erosion and Access	Barry Hall, Susan Mobbs, Roley Wilson
Planning and Development	Jane Hatton, Roley Wilson, Anthony Wright
Agri-Environment Access Schemes	David Barker, John Wayman
East Suffolk Line Community Rail Group	Margaret Hancock

### **Looking Ahead**

71. Priorities for SLAF over the coming year include:

- a) Investment in Green Access
  - i) To ensure that the increasing use of the green access network is effectively reflected in the Council's management of public rights of way and access.
- b) Sizewell C
  - i) To ensure that the development of Sizewell C acknowledges and addresses the forum's concerns for green access both during construction and after construction.
- c) Environmental Stewardship Scheme
  - i) To ensure the scheme adequately addresses public access into the countryside with public money for public goods.
- d) Planning
  - i) To engage with the planning process at a strategic level to seek a better green access network.

#### **Barry Hall**

Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

#### **David Barker**

Vice Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

**August 2021**

### **Sources of further information**

*The public have a right to inspect any documents included in this box – they are therefore in the public domain once the agenda is published. Background papers used in preparing the report must be kept by the report author for four years from the date of the meeting.*

*If there are no sources of further information, don't delete the box. Please insert the wording "No other documents have been relied on to a material extent in preparing this report".*

a) Local Access Forums:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-access-forums-participate-in-decisions-on-public-access>

b) The Suffolk Green Access Strategy: Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2020-2030:

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way-in-suffolk/green-access-strategy/>

c) Suffolk Local Access Forum web pages and membership

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way-in-suffolk/suffolk-local-access-forum/>

d) Suffolk Local Access Forum meeting 24 October 2019

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/assets/Roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way/SLAF-Minutes-etc/2019-10-24-SLAF-agenda-and-minutes.pdf>

e) Suffolk Local Access Forum meeting 23 January 2020

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/assets/Roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way/SLAF-Minutes-etc/2020-01-23-SLAF-agenda-and-minutes.pdf>

f) Suffolk Local Access Forum meeting 21 July 2020

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/assets/Roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way/SLAF-Minutes-etc/2020-07-21-SLAF-agenda-and-minutes.pdf>

### Suffolk Local Access Forum – Members Details

#### SLAF Membership August 2020 – July 2021

The forum had 15 members during the period covered by this report.

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

**Suzanne Bartlett** – Having been brought up on a farm near Framlingham, Suzanne has spent most of her life living and working in Suffolk. Since retiring from her profession as a Librarian, she has dedicated more time to walking and cycling in the countryside, whilst continuing as a self-employed writer and researcher. She is particularly concerned with promoting the benefits of outdoor activities for both physical health and mental well-being. *Suzanne has been a member of SLAF since October 2018.*

**Derek Blake MBE** – Chairman of Clare Walkers and the Activity Planning Trustee at Clare Castle Country Park, Derek has a keen interest in all aspects of leisure walking, as well as issues related to access, health & well-being, and tourism. *Derek has been a member of SLAF since October 2018.*

**Margaret Hancock** – Margaret is a Blue Badge Tourist Guide with a particular interest in promoting sustainable tourism. She is 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. Margaret has 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** – Jane has always lived in Suffolk enjoying the countryside as both a horse rider and dog walker. Jane has a background in Sales and Marketing and has previously been the Sudbury Town Centre Manager. She continues to work to improve access for the community into the countryside with an interest in promoting the benefits to health and tourism. She has introduced new walks for both the Suffolk Walking Festival and Walking for Health. *Jane has been a member of SLAF since October 2013.*

**Councillor James Mallinder** – James is an active parish councillor in Hollesley, volunteer for 'Meet up Mondays', and treasurer of a local Good Neighbour scheme. In 2019 he entered East Suffolk Council as ward member for Deben and with an enthusiasm for the environment, holds the Environment Portfolio. *James has been a member of SLAF since October 2019 representing District and Borough Councils.*

**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.*

**Susan Mobbs** – Sue is a walker and a cyclist mainly because of the opportunities they give for exploring landscape, history and nature at close hand. She is a volunteer with the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, doing practical work on local reserves, and a member of the Long Distance Walkers Association. Sue's professional background is in social care and social and community development, and she is keen to see improved access to the countryside and outdoor activities for people of all ages and abilities. *Susan has been a member of SLAF since October 2018.*

**Clare Phillips** – With a background in journalism, Clare has worked on the BBC's 'Farming Today' programme and presented countryside documentaries for BBC Radio Suffolk. Clare enjoys off-road running and walking in the Suffolk countryside, organises several Trail Races, and runs each year for her running club. She is a horse-rider and a Trustee of Ipswich Riding for the Disabled Group with experience of working with a wide group of riders with disabilities. Clare also chairs the footpaths sub-committee of Brantham Parish Council. *Clare has been a member of SLAF since October 2018.*

**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** – Jane was 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 joined SLAF in October 2009 representing the County Council and left in May 2021.*

**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 and publishers on the production of cycling and walking guides. For 15 years before retiring Anthony worked part-time for the national sustainable transport charity Sustrans as its Area Manager for Norfolk and Suffolk, while also working part-time as a Suffolk County Council Cycling Officer. He maintains an active interest in developing cycle routes and advises the Highways Agency and Norfolk & Suffolk Highways of their responsibilities for non-motorist users safety on the highway. *Anthony has been a member of SLAF since July 2003.*