

Cabinet

Report Title:	Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report 2021/22
Meeting Date:	11 October 2022
Lead Councillor(s):	Councillor Paul West, Cabinet Member for Ipswich, Operational Highways and Flooding
Local Councillor(s):	All Councillors
Director:	Andrew Cook, Executive Director of Growth, Highways and Infrastructure
Assistant Director or Head of Service:	Steve Palfrey, Assistant Director, Waste and Environment
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Brief summary of report

Local Access Forums were established by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and their role is to advise on matters relating to public rights of way and countryside access.

Forums are statutory consultees to various organisations such as National Highways, Network Rail and Natural England. They also advise their relevant appointing authority which for the Suffolk Local Access Forum (SLAF) is Suffolk County Council (SCC).

Under the Local Access Forum (England) Regulations 2007 (part 13), SLAF are required to submit an Annual Report to SCC. This is their nineteenth Annual Report, and it provides a summary of the forum’s activities between August 2021 and July 2022.

What is Cabinet being asked to decide?

1. The Cabinet is being asked to accept the Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report 2021/22 and address the report’s recommendations and state the actions that the Council is taking to address those recommendations.

Reason for recommendation

2. 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 and it is a requirement for that authority to publish the report. 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?

The key issues raised by the Suffolk Local Access Forum 2021/22 report are as follows:

a) **Sizewell C:**

Over the year of this report the forum has remained concerned about proposals for Sizewell C and its impact on the green access network. The forum has pressed for green access to be effectively managed during construction and for a lasting legacy of improved green access following construction.

Response: The Council is thankful to the forum for its work and is committed to protecting green access during the construction of Sizewell C and delivering a strong green access legacy from this development.

b) **Suffolk Green Energy Schemes:**

The forum recognises that a significant amount of staff time is dedicated to managing responses to a high number of green energy schemes in Suffolk. The forum has concerns over the visual impact that above-ground infrastructure, including extensive solar farms and new pylons, will have on people's enjoyment of the green access network.

Response: The Council thanks the forum for recognising the significant effort by officers in responding to green energy proposals and will work with projects to mitigate their impact on green access and people's enjoyment of the countryside.

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

The forum has continually pressed Network Rail to address rights of way severance and notes the continuing lack of progress implementing a Transport and Works Act Order, although the forum does note that some progress has been made delivering works at Needham Market Gypsy Lane. The forum is also concerned over National Highway's proposals at the A14 Copdock Interchange and at A11 Fiveways, Mildenhall, and how either scheme will re-connect public rights of way previously severed by the trunk road network.

Response: The Council thanks the forum for their on-going efforts with Network Rail and National Highways and will continue to work with both organisations to secure positive outcomes for the green access network.

d) **Large Scale Developments:**

The forum is concerned over how large developments integrate with local green access, the impact they have on the wider network, and how they can be made to deliver meaningful improvements to the public rights of way network.

Response: The Council thanks the forum for their position and will work with planners and developers to secure improvements to the green access network in line with the aims and objectives of The Suffolk Green Access Strategy.

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

3. 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 to Suffolk

achieving carbon neutrality by 2030. Public rights of way are part of the county council's walking and cycling highway network.

What are the resource and risk implications?

4. The Suffolk Local Access Forum continues to recognise and support the Council in these times acknowledging that there are, and will be, budget pressures in all areas of the Council's work.
5. The forum thanks the Council for providing additional funding of £150,000 and resources to the Rights of Way and Access team to manage the significant increase in customer reports since the start of COVID-19, to deliver capital projects funded through developer contributions, and to provide legal services to progress changes to the public rights of way network.
6. The forum welcomes the council investing in three rights of way bridges: Fen Bridge in Dedham; River Lark bridge in Mildenhall; and the Bailey Bridge between Walberswick and Southwold.
7. The forum asks the Council to continue its positive support of green access by ensuring budgets allow for effective management and promotion of the public rights of way walking and cycling network and green access.
8. 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.
9. An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is not required for the SLAF Annual Report 2021-2022, as advised by SCC Lead for Equalities and Inclusion.

What are the timescales associated with this decision?

10. Not applicable

Alternative options

11. 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?

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

Main body of report

Suffolk Local Access Forum Annual Report 2021/22

13. This is their nineteenth Annual Report of the Suffolk Local Access Forum and provides a summary of the forum's activities between August 2021 and July 2022.

14. The forum meets quarterly but during the period of this report in-person meetings were not always possible due to COVID-19 restrictions. Meetings took place on:
 - 28th October 2021 – meeting held online on Zoom (11 members attended, 1 apology, 2 guests speakers, 2 members of the public).
 - 27th January 2022 – meeting held online on Microsoft Teams (9 members attended, 4 apologies, 1 guest speaker, 3 members of the public).
 - 28th April 2022 – meeting held in person at Hintlesham Hall (9 members attended, 4 apologies).
 - 28th July 2022 – meeting held in person at Pinewood Community Hall with morning site visit (9 members attended, 5 apologies, 2 guest speakers).
15. Meetings are open to the public. Members of the public attended the October and January online meetings.
16. A suggestion was made to continue online meetings on a regular basis alternating between online and in-person meetings. The majority of members, including the Chairman, considered meetings should be held in person where possible as it allowed for morning site visits on the day of a SLAF meeting, and enabled more effective communication and interaction between members and guest speakers which benefitted SLAF's activities and their knowledge, understanding and appreciation of often complex issues.
17. A full list of members is given in Appendix A.

Administering SLAF

18. Members of SLAF are all volunteers with a wide range of experiences and knowledge of countryside access. They represent interests in walking, cycling, horse riding, disabilities, conservation, outdoor sport, land management and tourism. All are recruited following SCC's recruitment process.
19. In addition to the volunteer members, there are 2 councillor members, representing the County Council and District Councils, appointed by SCC Full Council and by the Suffolk Chief Officers Leadership Team, respectively.
20. The forum's independence is reflected in having their own logo, letter heading, email address and website 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/>.
21. SCC's Rights of Way and Access team administers the forum, providing secretariat services, booking meeting rooms, arranging refreshments, inviting speakers, organising site visits, re-imbursing travel expenses, and recruiting new members.
22. The cost of administering the forum in 2021-22 was £756.92.
23. 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 2021/22

Sizewell C

24. Although the forum welcomed the opportunity for significant investment in the rights of way and green access network for walking, cycling and horse riding as a result of the proposed construction of Sizewell C, they remain concerned over plans and the impact construction will have on the green access network in the area.
25. Of specific concern is the coastal footpath Leiston Cum Sizewell Public Footpath 21 and how it will be affected by a proposed sea defence.
26. In addition, although the forum welcomes proposals to dedicate the Sandlings Walk through Kenton Hills as a public right of way, it is concerned about onwards journeys northwards along the Sandlings Walk using Leiston Cum Sizewell Public Footpath 19 and the on-going lack of a solution to relocate this public right of way off the Eastbridge Road which is narrow and at times busy with road traffic.

Suffolk Energy Schemes

27. The forum received updates from SCC officers on a number of energy schemes across Suffolk:
 - a) Sunnica solar farm which straddles Suffolk and Cambridgeshire
 - b) East Anglia One North and East Anglia Two Offshore windfarms with onshore infrastructure
 - c) East Anglia 3 Offshore windfarm with onshore infrastructure
 - d) Bramford to Twinstead National Grid Reinforcement
 - e) East Anglia Green National Grid from Norwich through Suffolk to Tilbury Essex,
 - f) SEAS National Grid offshore link from Suffolk to Kent
 - g) Nautilus Interconnector between Britain and Belgium
28. The forum is very concerned by the proposal for constructing pylons which during construction will have a physical impact on the use of the public rights of way network and post construction leave a legacy of a visual impact.
29. The forum has concerns over large scale solar farms that can have a significant impact on the landscape and would prefer to see greater installation of solar panels on south facing roofs.
30. Due to the increased volume of planning applications for new solar farms in Suffolk the forum developed a Solar Farm Position Statement to use in response to new applications with suggested guidance in relation to public rights of way.

Network Rail

31. The forum welcomed a presentation from Steve Day, Liability Negotiations Manager Network Rail, and Daniel Fisk, Health and Safety Manager (Public

and Passenger) Network Rail, with updates on proposals for rights of way crossings in Needham Market, Higham and Brantham.

32. The forum was pleased that Network Rail was progressing works on Needham Market Public Footpath 6 (Gipsy Lane), and supported works to divert Higham Public Footpath 1, but pressed Network Rail to look at various options for Brantham Public Footpath 6 to protect countryside access and avoid walking beside and along a main road.
33. The forum thanked SCC officers for regular updates on the progress of a Suffolk-wide Transport and Works Act Order.

Strategic Road Network

34. On Friday 12th November 2021, the SLAF Chair attended an exhibition by National Highways at Capel St Mary Village Hall on proposals to upgrade the A14 Junction 55 Copdock Interchange.
35. In addition, the forum is one of a number of stakeholders invited to National Highway's Community and Engagement Stakeholder Reference Group meetings.
36. The forum welcomed Tom Lawman, Programme Development Manager Operations, National Highways, to their January meeting. Tom Lawman presented on proposals for the A14 Junction 55 Copdock Interchange and also the A11 Fiveways junction, Barton Mills.
37. The forum was keen to understand the process of National Highway's Road Investment Strategy and their Walking, Cycling and Horse Riding Assessment and Review process.
38. The forum raised concerns with National Highways over how proposals, if they progress, will impact on green access in the area with the rights of way network previously severed by the construction of the A12 and A14 which prevents easy movement for walking or riding between Belstead, Washbrook and Ipswich.
39. Following a site visit to Belstead on 28th July 2022, a specific concern for the forum was a bridleway underpass under the A14 which was in need of urgent upgrading and developing existing culverts under the A12 to enable access for walking, cycling and horse riding.
40. The forum has pressed National Highways to use their own Walking, Cycling and Horse riding Assessment and Review process to ensure any design for the Copdock Interchange enhances green access.
41. The forum is also keen to see National Highways consider future use of the green access network in determining designs to ensure those designs allow for increased journeys on foot and cycle.
42. The forum is also engaged with National Highways over proposals to upgrade the A11 Fiveways junction at Barton Mills and stresses the importance of providing a safe crossing bridge for people using the Lark Valley Path.

Planning and Development

43. The forum welcomed Chris Ward Planning Officer Policy, and Rosalynn Claxton, Special Projects Team Leader, Ipswich Borough Council, to their July

meeting. They jointly presented on current and planned developments in, and immediately around, Ipswich and aspirations by Ipswich Borough Council to create a green orbital trail called the Ipswich Green Trail.

44. The forum was keen to understand how sustainable travel, especially cycling, will be incorporated into the design of the Ipswich Garden Suburb and questioned IBC on the detail, including gradients, for a cycling and pedestrian bridge over the railway at Westerfield.
45. The forum has questioned the continued delay at New Cut West in Ipswich to provide access to a new outdoor public space which is blocked by fencing. The forum appreciates the efforts of officers but are keen to see the issues in this location, specifically the continued use of hoarding and the lack of installation of lighting, resolved.

Environmental Land Management Scheme

46. The forum is concerned that the government's proposed shift of farm support to *providing public money for public goods*, with an emphasis on issues such as soil health and biodiversity, will result in the loss of public access in the countryside created through previous Countryside Stewardship Schemes, especially for equestrians. Future post-EU Countryside Stewardship schemes are heavily focused on soil health but have not mentioned the provision of new and improved public access.
47. On 9th February 2022, the forum wrote to Rt Hon Dr Therese Coffey MP Suffolk Coastal and Secretary of State at the Department for Work & Pensions about the need for improved access to the countryside being part of any post-EU farm support package and emphasised that the Government has stated a policy of 'providing public money for public goods'.
48. The letter was subsequently copied to all Suffolk MPs and the regional Local Access Forums.
49. The forum stated in their letter that any new Countryside Stewardship scheme must provide improved access with the provision of permanent new routes by a single capital payment to the landowner where access meets the needs of users, are located where they are beneficial, and provides a fair return for the taxpayer.
50. The forum stressed that any new system of Government support should deliver public enjoyment alongside food production and enhanced wildlife with the benefits of health and well-being by enabling walking and riding in the countryside most certainly a public good.
51. On 8th June 2022 the forum received a response from Rt Hon George Eustice MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, via Rt Hon Dr Therese Coffey MP.

England Coast Path

52. The forum welcomed the approval by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs of proposals for the England Coast Path between Aldeburgh and Hopton-on-Sea.

53. The forum welcomed the addition of resources to deliver the England Coast Path along the Suffolk coast.
54. The forum sees a natural link between the sections of the England Coast Path in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex, and supports the creation of a trail partnership between Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex to promote a regional path along all three counties for tourism benefits.

Open Access Restrictions

55. The forum is one of a number of consultees to Natural England on Open Access sites, commenting on proposals for Directions which create seasonal restrictions to public access or for dogs to be kept on short, fixed leads, for land management or conservation purposes.
56. The forum considered a Direction from Natural England on extending restrictions at a number of sites within the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB for one additional month to keep dogs on short, fixed leads throughout August to protect ground nesting birds. These Directions were first introduced in 2007 and are reviewed every five years. The forum supported the review and continuation of restrictions for a further 5 years.

Promoting Countryside Access

57. The forum was delighted to see the Suffolk Walking Festival re-launched following 2 years of being cancelled and held virtually due to COVID-19. The forum congratulates officers on a successful event with an economic impact within Suffolk of £117,000 on a return on investment of 34:1 and for leaving an estimated 11 million footprints across the county.
58. The forum is impressed with the new Discover Suffolk outdoor app promoting over 150 walking and riding routes across Suffolk.
59. The forum looks forward to seeing the development of the first of a series of QR self-guided trails in Suffolk.

Regional Local Access Forum

60. The forum chair and vice chair attended a regional LAF meeting on 13th January 2022 and 7th July 2022. The regional meetings allow LAFs to learn of issues within each county, advise how they are addressing these issues, and identify areas of common ground by working together.

SLAF Membership

61. The forum had 15 members during the period covered by this report. Derek Blake MBE stepped down in August 2021 and Councillor Joanna Spicer joined the forum in June 2022.

Working Groups:

62. The forum has the following working groups:

Topic	Membership
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

63. 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) Planning
 - i) To work with the planning process to seek a better green access network.
- d) Severance of Public Rights of Way
 - i) To ensure that Network Rail and National Highways deliver works that maintain a well-connected and easy to use green access network.
- e) Recruitment of new members
 - i) To recruit up to three new members to the forum to reflect a wide range of interests and experiences in accessing Suffolk's countryside.

Barry Hall

Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

David Barker

Vice Chair of Suffolk Local Access Forum

August 2022

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) 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/>

- c) Suffolk Local Access Forum meeting 28 October 2021

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/assets/Roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way/SLAF-Minutes-etc/2021-10-28-SLAF-agenda-and-papers.pdf>

- d) Suffolk Local Access Forum meeting 27 January 2022

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/assets/Roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way/SLAF-Minutes-etc/2022-01-27-SLAF-agenda-and-minutes.pdf>

- e) Suffolk Local Access Forum meeting 28 April 2022

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/assets/Roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way/SLAF-Minutes-etc/SLAF-Agenda-and-meeting-notes-28-April-2022.pdf>

- f) Suffolk Local Access Forum meeting 28 July 2022

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/assets/Roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way/SLAF-Minutes-etc/28-July-2022-SLAF-agenda-and-minutes.pdf>

- g) 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/>

Suffolk Local Access Forum – Members Details

SLAF Membership August 2021 – July 2022

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 became a member of SLAF in October 2018 and stepped down in August 2021.*

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 Joanna Spicer – Joanna has lived in Suffolk for 50 years having come to live here in 1972 to work for the newly formed East Anglia Tourist Board as the Information Officer. She was first elected to Suffolk County Council in 1989 and represents the 16 rural villages of the Blackbourn Division, north-east of Bury St Edmunds. Joanna is not only a keen walker, but she also works with parish councils and landowners to press for additional rights of way and green space to be a larger part of new developments. *Joanna has been a member of SLAF since June 2022 representing Suffolk County Council.*

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.*