

South Downs Local Access Forum (SDLAF) – Meeting Notes

Date: Friday 19th September 2025

Time: 10:30 – 12:30

Location: South Downs Centre Hall, Midhurst, GU29 9DH

Attendees

LAF Members:

Lucy Austen (LA), Merovee Churton (MC), Robert Damper (RD), Carolyn Fair (CF), Richard Johnson (RJ), Doug Jones (Chair) (DJ), Lipika Mandal (LM), Virginia Pullen (VP), Andrew Shaxson (AS), James Tulley (JT), John Vannuffel (JV)

SDNPA Officers:

Andy Gattiker (AG), Ben Marsh (BM), Ashia Carter (AC)

Guests: None.

Apologies:

Sean Howell, Simon James, Glynn Jones, Roger Mullenger, Chris Todd, Robert Whitcombe

1. Welcome & Apologies

The five new members (Lucy Austen, Merovee Churton, Lipika Mandal, Virginia Pullen and James Tulley) were all welcomed to the meeting. It was also noted that both Sean Howell and Chris Todd were also new members.
Apologies were noted as above.

2. Items for AOB

- AG - 2026 SDW accessibility challenge

3. Notes and Actions from previous meeting

The below actions were completed:

- AG checked scheme of delegation and finalised recruitment.
- DJ & LS met to discuss EDI recruitment for committees.
- Money for additional Capital has been allocated to projects.
- AG circulated draft LCWIP
- Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation presentation was shared with LAF members.
- DJ, AG & BM refined questions and purpose of Highways Survey to encourage responses.
- A response was submitted to Hampshire CAP and SDNPA PMP.
- RM circulated minutes from MOD meeting.

The below actions were carried over:

- Circulate the 2024 Annual Report (produced in February) to all LAF members

4. South Downs National Park general update

AG provided a general update from the National Park Authority, making the following points:

- £340,000 DEFRA capital grant confirmed in July; must be spent by March.

- Expected to become a regular annual funding stream.
- Funding is for capital investment only - new projects or improvements, not maintenance.
- Some projects require planning permission and surveys, which take time.
- Natural England funding supports access to the South Downs Way.
- Collaboration with landowners, RSPB, BHCC, museums, and third parties.
 - Example projects: Charleston e-bike hire linked to new Lewes cycle route; Dye Garden at Ditchling Museum made accessible without museum entry; Local Authorities replacing stiles and gates.
- Funding is spread geographically across the park.
- Revenue funding unchanged; capital is easier but subject to Treasury changes.
- Capital projects can include digital or informational access improvements.
- Marketing of public transport services was suggested.

Action 1: Notify AG of any network projects to add to the future funding pipeline.

Partnership Management Plan & Local Plan Review

- PMP sets shared direction with partners; consultation has ended.
- Local Access Forum (LAF) has submitted feedback.
- Access targets in PMP seen as too conservative; stakeholders want more ambition.
- Revised key indicators to better reflect access goals.
- Unmet targets will help build a narrative and evidence base for future planning
- Suggestions for improvements to the latest draft PMP Targets were made: both for an access KPI and for the public transport Target.
- Local Plan Review follows PMP:
- Regulation 19 consultation expected Spring 2026.
- Aim for approval and publication by end of 2026.
- Public access is a key theme; LAF contacted parishes to advocate for better connectivity with new allocated sites.

5. LAF Terms of Reference

BM highlighted amendments to the Terms of Reference, covering:

- Terms of Reference last updated in 2017; now include recruitment and equality.
- Annual report showcases LAF's achievements and effectiveness.
- Suggestion to make annual reflection a standing agenda item.
- KPIs drawn from the Partnership Management Plan (PMP).
- NFLAF uses a coloured grid system to track and review progress.
- SDNPA members adhere to the National Park Code of Conduct.
- LAF is a statutory body.
- Clarification needed on national rules, specifically regarding three elected members.
- Item to be brought back for approval at next meeting.

Action 2: BD to send NFLAF Terms of Reference and example of grid review.

6. Local Authority Survey Discussion

DJ informed the group of the current progress of the survey:

- Responses had now been received from all four Highway Authorities
- Survey could help monitor and improve access but may only reflect ROW data, missing wider access issues.
- Highways Authorities have countywide duties, limiting NP-specific prioritisation:

- none have any different policies or priorities applying inside the National Park
- all PROW policies and practices are applied consistently countywide within each Highway Authority.
- none of the Authorities have separate data for the part of their County that is inside the National Park.
- Inconsistent obstruction policies across counties (e.g. ESCC strong, west weaker).
- LAF considering access management post-devolution and local government changes.
- Opportunity to define a strategic access network for SDNP.
- Need for a coordinated plan to influence new authorities at the right time.
- Potential to request NP-specific data and use ATE funding for access officers.
- Focus on statutory duties first, then enhance NP access.
- Promote deliverable improvements and best practice principles.
- New authorities offer a fresh start—important to keep them engaged and proactive.

7. Consultations

BM provided an overview of the current consultations that the LAF had been asked to respond to, which included:

Active Travel Network Plan

- Active Travel Network Plan (ATNP) is developing; supported by ATE-funded mapping tool to identify fragmented/aspirational routes and rank projects.
- Mapping progress will be shared for LAF comment once complete (Action 3: BM to share).
- Part of PMP delivery; sets a vision and principles for improving active travel in the NP.
- Document is statutory and live, with a priority network that will be regularly reviewed by LAF and presented to NPA.
- ATE prefers endorsement from Highways Authorities, but devolution complicates this.
- PMP provides default endorsement, but it's not equivalent to formal approval.
- Collated network plans from Highways Authorities are urban-heavy; need to reflect leisure use and NP character.
- New authorities may offer a chance to reframe access priorities and funding.

Action 3 – BM to share map once completed for comment.

Accord

- Accord outlines NP collaboration with Highways Authorities.
- Signing delayed due to devolution; currently used as a reference document.
- Discussed at Highways meeting; agreed to update with devolution principles.
- Will become a transitional document with appendices; may not be signed but will be ready for new authorities.

Countryside Code

- Countryside Code consultation: LAF Members had been encouraged to submit individual comments and to encourage others to do so.

8. Matters for next meeting and LAF working groups

No new matters were identified. Terms of Reference to be brought back for approval.

9. AOB

SDW Accessibility Awareness

- Former volunteer Andy Davis? plans to complete the South Downs Way (SDW) in 2026 to raise awareness and promote accessibility.
- The route will be split into sections and completed with support from other volunteers.
- SDNP is assisting with logistics and trampers (all-terrain mobility aids).
- While similar initiatives have been done before, this effort aims to highlight possibilities and identify barriers to access along the SDW.

Action 4 – Contact AG if interested and share with your networks.

10. Date of next meeting

Monday 1st December 2025, 14:00 – 16:30 (with lunch from 1pm)