

South Downs Local Access Forum (SDLAF) – Meeting Notes

Date: Wednesday 21st May 2025

Time: 10:30 – 12:30

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

Attendees

LAF Members:

Andrew Shaxson (AS), Tim Burr (TB), Doug Jones (Chair) (DJ), Bob Damper (BD), Carolyn Fair (CF), Glynn Jones (GJ), Richard Johnson (RJ) Roger Mullenger (RM)

SDNPA Officers:

Andy Gattiker (AG), Ben Marsh (BM), Ashia Ciesielczuk (AC), Laura Sercombe (LS), Richard Sandiford (RS)

Guests: None.

Apologies:

John Vannuffel, Robert Whitcombe

<p>1. Welcome & Apologies</p> <p>Noted above.</p>
<p>2. Items for AOB</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• RM update from MOD meeting• AS – Enough publications for our ROW & SDW
<p>Notes of previous meeting</p> <p>The below actions were completed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• BM contacted the inactive LAF members and advertised for new members.• A response was submitted to the Local Plan Review and parishes with new allocations were contacted to encourage them to think about access improvements.• A response was submitted to Winchester City LCWIP and East Sussex ROWAP• The notes from the New Forest LCWIP were circulated along with a link to the South Downs LCWIP consultation• DJ & RM drafted and circulated a list of questions to County Councils about the state of their ROWs.• Members provided questions for the upcoming MOD meeting.• BM had circulated the Terms of Reference.• BM and DJ had produced the Annual Report. <p>The below actions were carried over:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• AG to clarify report usage and audience with Siôn McGeever.
<p>3. Membership</p> <p>DJ gave an update on membership:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The LAF received 15 applications.

- Applications have been reviewed, with AG needing to complete a final review, before letters are sent out.
- Recruitment prioritised health and wellbeing, climate change, nature recovery, underrepresented communities, disability, climate change, off-road cycling, and landowner rep.
- Regulations permit 11 to 22 members, allowing flexibility in the number of invitations issued.

Action 1: AG & LS to check scheme of delegation and finalise recruitment.

5. EDI Recruitment for Committees

LS discussed how the SDNPA are looking at EDI recruitment to committees.

- Ensure diverse representation within the community and explore ways to attract a wider range of participants.
- Consider early thoughts on engagement strategies.
- Clarify the application process to the LAF as the LAF is not a formal committee.
- Factor in work commitments when planning involvement.
- Online meetings could improve accessibility. Hybrid meetings pose management challenges.
- Current recruitment for LAF highlights plans for in-person meetings in Midhurst this year, with efforts to accommodate varying needs.

Action 2: LS & DJ to meet and discuss.

6. South Downs National Park Update

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

- NPA revenue cut by about 9% but sorted finances – innovative. NPA core capital increase for deliverable this year.
- DEFRA has provided additional capital funding for access improvements, expanding the scope to include physical design planning alongside traditional infrastructure projects.
- Budget allocation is for £340,000 with £200,000 being given in April. Double allocation of £100,000 for SDW which has to be spent by 31st March 2026, creating a tight timescale for implementation and requiring careful management to meet deadlines.
- There is a list of projects but keen to spend money efficiently across the park. We are expecting an underspend due to staff capacity to run projects. The aim is to use the money to help landowners and local authorities to deliver projects. Highways could bulk buy/grant for gates (Stiles to gates). Other improvement works but this involves officer time and planning. There is about 8-9 months to deliver.
- Look through CIL project list to see if there any that can be supported. ROWIP had no funding at time.
- Highways deliver along with own parishes could be a quick win.
- Contact the Enhanced Partnerships with local authorities and bus operators. Extra funding recently but challenging to maintain. Promotion may help. Stakeholders and find local champions for routes. There is no ring-fenced funding for public transport. CPRE/Campaign for buses. Promotion and publication is included under capital expenditure.
- West Sussex have good signage for ROWs. East Sussex signage is not so good. Lack other option buy finger posts etc.

- In touch with highways authorities but need to make sure fund items that cannot be funded elsewhere.
- There is a project with a volunteer regarding the info we publish – Miles without stiles and on our website. The aim is to put more routes on our website with clear information and to upgrade what we currently have park wide. The routes may be graded at a high-level covering surface, gradient, parking, toilets etc. This will allow the user to make their own judgement as every user is different.
- South Downs LCWIP which is funded by Active Travel England is out for consultation. It has had a light touch review. Aim is to have a high-level network plan which can feed into PMP. Attach a principle of how access has improved but with no detail. Principles may focus on future projects, crossing and barriers to good access, and how to improve long routes.
- BM post as Rights of Way & Access Officer for the SDNPA has been made a core role which is excellent news for LAF and delivery.
- CROW review will be discussed at a future LAF as this will be significant to SDNP. There is a mapping review and definitions review.
- Egrets Way progress Phase 7 to Piddinghoe. Active Travel England are funding an agreed design with hopes to open end of summer.
- Centurion way progress is complex as working with landowners and ecological issues. The entire route has been approved through planning but may need to go off route with a new alignment. The next section, Station to Cucumber Farm, is waiting for some landscaping, fencing, and the licence with the landowner. Hopefully this will open by mid-July.
- Rother Valley Green Way – SDNP have supported financially to progress development and consultants. Slow progress and not shovel ready. Stakeholders and landowners are on board.

Action 3: Let AG know of any ideas or groups that could use some capital support.

Action 4: AG to circulate draft LCWIP to members when complete.

7. Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation

RS gave a short presentation to highlight devolution and local government reorganisation.

- SDNP currently lacks influence on funding but aims to be recognized as a key stakeholder in future opportunities. Establishing credibility and visibility now will improve its position when financial decisions are made.
- A consolidated settlement would allow SDNP to have a stronger voice and greater impact on funding allocation, ensuring a bigger opportunity to influence decisions when the time comes.
- Relationships with stakeholders will become more streamlined, shifting from about 15 to 5 key partnerships. While this simplifies collaboration, it also increases the influence of fewer entities, meaning strategic engagement is crucial. The mayor's priorities will determine how much SDNP can leverage these relationships.
- ROW management is expected to become fragmented, meaning coordination will be more complex. This could lead to gaps in responsibility and implementation unless a clear framework is established. Hampshire border changes will further affect ROW responsibilities, splitting duties between different governing bodies and potentially complicating management.

- Unitary Authorities could collaborate on ROW management, but they must balance this with broader obligations, including partnerships with other National Parks and National Landscapes. Coordination across multiple entities requires careful negotiation.
- With future responsibilities still uncertain, SDNP should evaluate whether it can manage ROW more efficiently under the new structure. This would allow for greater autonomy and control but may also require additional resources.
- Parishes may face challenges in adjusting to new administrative structures, potentially affecting their role in ROW management and local decision-making.
- There are both risks and opportunities within the evolving framework. SDNP must closely monitor the mayor's priorities, as their policies will shape accessibility, funding, and development.
- Unitary powers will prioritize climate action and net zero policies, focusing efforts on environmental sustainability and reducing carbon emissions.
- Large urban areas near the National Park—such as Gatwick, Portsmouth, and Southampton—fall outside SDNP's jurisdiction, yet they will be integral to regional planning and funding strategies.
- Economic growth is central to policy discussions, but expectations for new funding opportunities may be too optimistic given the current financial landscape.
- Proactive engagement is essential—SDNP must demonstrate its value as a facilitator of regional development, ensuring it is perceived as an asset rather than a barrier to progress.

Action 5: Circulate presentation to members.

8. Highways Authorities Surveys

BM gave an update

- The SDLAF questionnaire received responses from East Sussex and Brighton & Hove, while West Sussex is still processing and Hampshire declined due to staffing constraints.
- Most relevant information is within ITPROW, collected by county rather than specific to the National Park. ROW types vary across counties, but a general understanding allows some answers to be inferred.
- The Local Access Forum (LAF) faces challenges in functioning as an independent advisory body due to limited access to necessary data.
- Annual reviews are conducted for the National Park, but the agreed accord lacks capacity for implementation.
- Although data is collected, it is not utilized, and there is no monitoring system in place.
- East Sussex has chosen not to monitor ROWs, reflecting broader challenges as highways authorities struggle with staffing shortages and excessive pressure.
- The LAF cannot effectively support highways or compare issues without proper data.
- Basic statistics are needed to address specific questions and improve understanding.
- In the context of devolution discussions, access to clearer answers will be beneficial for future planning.
- The purpose of data collection must be well-defined to ensure relevant information is gathered effectively.
- Some councils only provide statutory services, limiting available resources.

Action 6: DJ, AG & BM Reflect and refine questions and purpose to encourage responses.

9. Accord

AG and BM gave an update of the Accord.

- The accord was established between the Local Highways Authorities and the National Park to achieve shared outcomes through joint working.
- The current accord does not clearly define the National Park as the access authority, which is a statutory duty.
- A new accord will be developed following devolution and local government reorganisation.
- Highways Authorities agreed to a review of the document to enhance duties, expand delegated powers, reduce reporting, and add guiding principles for devolution and liabilities.
- Once reviewed, the document will require approval from the SDNPA Senior Leadership Team before circulation to LAF members.

10. Consultations

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

- **Hampshire CAP** – Consultation ends on 16th August.
- **Hampshire Byways Policy** – Scheduled for Executive members in June; focuses on prevention rather than repair.
- **East Sussex ROWAP** – Response submitted by LAF; draft plan expected later in the year.
- **Winchester City LCWIP** – LAF submitted a response requesting a walking/cycling route from the station to the South Downs Way and horsebox parking.
- **SD Partnership Management Plan (PMP)** – Steering group summary circulated; draft PMP presented to the NPA on 22nd May for approval before consultation until 31 July.
 - Concern over the lack of public transport targets; baseline data available for passenger numbers comparing pre-COVID to current figures.
 - The park should set achievable transport targets to align with other National Parks.
 - Notable omission: “reducing conflict when it occurs,” despite 49% of online survey comments categorizing dangerous byways as a barrier for walkers and cyclists.
 - Consultation will lead to adjustments, but not all concerns can be incorporated; targets apply to the park, not the authority.
- **SD Local Plan** – LAF submitted a response and reached out to parishes with housing allocations, encouraging them to consider ROW and access improvements.

Action 7: BM to create officer comment for Hampshire CAP.

Action 8: Any comments for Hampshire CAP send to BM by 31st July.

Action 9: Any comments for SDNPA PMP to DJ by 24th July.

11. AOB

Annual Report – BM

The annual report was written in February and a PDF version is on the website. The Comms Team are currently creating a smarter looking version.

Action 10: Circulate Annual Report once in a publishable format.

MOD – RM

RM attended the MOD meeting at Longmoor. There is a new commander for the South East.

The National Security Act states that any Army land is prohibited but existing arrangements will stay as they are.

Ramblers are able to lead groups across Army land. They need to fill out a form 2 weeks prior to the walk to notify the Army of the plans.

Aldershot have some newly designed information boards showing walks and bridleways. Chilcombe's information boards are out of date, but they will be producing new ones with information about the area.

Action 11: RM to circulate minutes from MOD meeting.

13. Date of next meeting

Friday 19 September 2025, 10:30 – 12:30