

South Downs Local Access Forum

Surrey County Council's Rights of Way Improvement Plan: Consultation Response

The attention of the South Downs Local Access Forum (SDLAF) has been drawn to this current consultation exercise and this letter constitutes formal advice from the Forum. As a body listed under Section 94(4), local authorities are required, in accordance with Section 94(5) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, to have regard to advice from Local Access Forums in carrying out their functions.

It will also be important for the County Council to take account of the enhanced Protected Landscapes duty placed on all local authorities by Section 245 of the 2023 Levelling-up and Regeneration Act (LURA):

In exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in any National Park in England, a relevant authority must seek to further National Park purposes and if it appears that there is a conflict between those purposes, must attach greater weight to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area comprised in the National Park.

The comments of the Local Access Forum are as follows:

Whilst the four main themes which subdivide the Improvement Plan are welcomed and understood, it is felt that the County Council should consider adding a dedicated theme for Protected Landscapes within the plan. Not only does Surrey border the South Downs National Park in the southwest, but it also includes the Surrey Hills and High Wield National Landscape areas. In addition, recent Government Guidance about the LURA Act (referred to above) highlights functional connectivity between a Protected Landscape and its setting, including Rights of Way, Open Access Land and other recreational links joining the designated area to the wider countryside.

The National Park and the other National Landscape areas offer important opportunities for recreation, relaxation and improved health & wellbeing. It is possible that collaboration between the County Council and these Protected Landscapes could improve access for under-represented groups and increase opportunities for social prescribing initiatives. These enhancements could attract funding from a range of sources.

One specific example of the potential to improve connections with the South Downs National Park would be between Haslemere and Alice Holt Forest where an improved, off-road route for vulnerable Rights of Way users could be identified in the Plan and could potentially attract funding.

It is encouraging that the County Council acknowledges the increasing impacts of Climate Change and is proactively seeking solutions. Sharing ideas and best practices with other authorities could be mutually beneficial.

We welcome the prioritisation of safety in maintenance planning and note that the plan rightly identifies safety concerns, lack of information, and lack of confidence as key barriers to Rights of Way use. These factors are likely to be relevant within the South Downs National Park and for other authorities.

The plan's recognition of inconsiderate behaviour between users as a significant concern for both users and landowners is valuable, and we acknowledge the challenge of addressing this issue among the wider public. Surrey's experience in fostering responsible behaviour could be valuable for other authorities.

We commend the Council's impressive 70% response rate from Parish Councils, demonstrating effective engagement with local stakeholders. Parish Councils offer valuable insights and represent a diverse range of perspectives.

It is hoped that these comments and observations are helpful to you.

Yours Sincerely
Ben Marsh

On behalf of
Doug Jones
Chair of the South Downs Local Access Forum

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For more information about the South Downs Local Access Forum: www.southdowns.gov.uk/laf