

South Downs

Local Access Forum

South Downs Partnership Management Plan (PMP): Consultation response

Thank you for consulting the Local Access Forum on this matter and it is hoped that the points summarised below will be helpful in the next phases of the review of the PMP during which priorities are likely to be discussed and lead partners identified.

This letter constitutes formal advice from the Forum and, as you will be aware, in accordance with Section 94(5) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, the National Park Authority is required to have regard to advice from the Local Access Forum in carrying out its functions.

The points below draw upon comments made to other consultation exercises by partner organisations over recent months as well as observations on the current PMP:

- Access into and within the National Park is particularly important to enable people to understand and enjoy the special qualities of the National Park (the second statutory purpose of all the country's National Parks) as well as helping to improve their physical and mental health and their overall wellbeing.
- Everyone should have the right to experience these benefits including young families, the elderly, blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems.
- Access is, however, increasingly difficult in many parts of the National Park because of a lack of public transport and decreasing amounts of path maintenance as local authority budgets are cut. There are also other issues which act as barriers to the use of the rights of way network within the National Park.
- The Government's review of National Parks (the Glover Review) concluded that "traffic spoils tranquillity and poor access keeps people who should be able to visit away." These issues are pertinent in the South Downs.
- As an example, in 2024 Hampshire County Council proposed to withdraw all its funding for bus services that it was not legally required to provide. This would hit the South Downs National Park area hard: not just for resident communities but also for visitors, including those trying to use any of the 'Long Distance Trails' including the South Downs Way, Meon Valley Trail, Hangers Way, Shipwrights Way, Staunton Way, Wayfarers Walk and Writers Way. None of the bus routes connecting with these popular long distance routes was due to be retained. The Forum also pointed out that the cuts would also threaten the National Park's ambitions of 'A National Park for All' and its aims of making sure that the area is available to everyone, inclusive and enjoyed by all. Although there would still be rail services to Winchester, Petersfield, Liphook, Liss and Rowlands Castle, there were no proposals to retain any supported bus services from any of these stations to take anyone out into the National Park. In addition about 30 villages in the National Park were likely to lose the last remnants of their bus services. The Forum also stressed that transport is already one, if not the biggest, barrier to accessing the countryside for many people.

- Improved partnership working with public transport operators (bus and rail) and with local authority public transport teams should therefore be part of the outcome of this PMP review.
- Local authorities should also have special regard to the National Park in their Countryside Services and Rights of Way departments. The authorities should have different policies applying inside the National Park compared with other parts of the counties and these should encompass retaining amenity, character, heritage, nature and habitats as well as the quality of the rights of way and access network provided.
- Local authorities should also look to attract potential new users to the rights of way network and this may require new policies if people are being discouraged by danger or safety issues. This can be particularly important for vulnerable users and for health & wellbeing improvements.
- Safety concerns, lack of information (including signage and way-finding) and lack of confidence have all been identified as key barriers to rights of way use.
- Inconsiderate behaviour and conflicts between users has also been recognised as a significant concern for both users and landowners.
- It is possible that improved collaboration between the County Councils and with the National Park Authority could address a number of these issues, improve access for under-represented groups and increase opportunities for social prescribing initiatives. These enhancements could potentially attract funding from a range of sources.
- The 'Accord for the Management of Rights of Way and Access in the South Downs National Park', which was signed between the four Local Highway Authorities and the SDNPA in 2012, should be revisited and revised/updated as necessary to better apply to the changes in circumstances and also to take account of new local authority structures (and responsibilities) emerging from the Government's Devolution proposals.
- There could be opportunities from the new Strategic Authorities being created across Hampshire and Sussex. It is possible that rights of way and access issues might initially be viewed as a Cinderella function – but their importance, particularly within a National Park, should be stressed and opportunities should be explored.
- Reductions in local authority budgets for rights of way and access issues over recent years is of great concern and could, inadvertently and gradually, result in the loss of some paths if they were to remain in poor or overgrown condition year after year. The National Park Authority could work with the local authorities (and other partners) to press Government for special extra funding within National Parks and/or to seek funding from other sources.
- Reductions in the size of the National Park Authority's small access team in recent years appear to have had a significant effect on the Authority's ability to handle its workload and to service the Local Access Forum.
- It is difficult to assess progress on any PMP outcomes in the period 2020-2025 as no indicators appear to have been specified in the PMP and hence monitoring and evaluation is not easy.

- Outcome 5 of the current PMP aimed to create a National Park for All, to improve accessibility through a network of high quality rights of way and to encourage sustainable access into and around the National Park by encouraging the retention and expansion of rural transport services. Outcome 10 aimed to promote sustainable tourism but it is not immediately clear whether this was due to address travel to/from the National Park.
- Barriers identified in the PMP included physical barriers (eg. path surfaces, gates and stiles), economic barriers (including transport costs), a lack of appropriate information and a lack of confidence in the 'final mile' (with visitors arriving by sustainable modes being uncertain about how to reach their ultimate destination). It was also noted that there was a shortage of 'family friendly' paths suitable for inexperienced and vulnerable users.
- Whilst there has been some progress with a 'Miles Without Stiles' initiative (seven short routes are identified on the SDNPA's website amongst the 3,300km of public paths) and a project to extend the Centurion Way continues as part of a network of strategic routes, it is difficult to assess overall progress because of the apparent absence of indicators, lead partners or evaluation.
- The previous PMP (2014-19) had stated that walking was the most popular activity in the National Park and that the rights of way network is the primary means by which most people enjoy the area whether on foot, horseback or bicycle.
- That PMP also noted that pressures on rights of way in popular locations and conflicts between different recreational users were increasing and needed to be addressed where they occur.
- Those issues were included in Policies 28-30 of that PMP and were carried over into a number of Delivery Areas in an Appendix. Actions identified included 'the development of consistent reporting on conditions of rights of way' and 'working with partners to develop an agreed approach where conflicts exist on Byways Open to All Traffic'. Partners were identified for each action. Ten years later, whilst there has been progress on some specific rights of way (South Downs Way, Serpents Trail, Egret's Way etc), it is not clear whether there has been progress on the more general actions.
- The SDNPA acknowledged in 2022 that some communities are disproportionately affected by the use of motorised vehicles on public rights of way and that damage can be done to the routes which often makes use by non-vehicular users difficult, impassable or intimidating. The Authority decided not to take the lead on this matter but would continue its partnership arrangements with Hampshire County Council in reviewing the situation. The outcome of the review (which primarily affects routes in East Hampshire) is still awaited.
- There is also potential scope for improved partnership working via the Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs) that are being produced by local authorities with a focus on Active Travel. Legislation now requires all local authorities to "seek to further National Park purposes" and so these LCWIPs should recognise the existence of the National Park and should be looking to improve access (by walking and cycling) into, from and within the South Downs – as well as seeking modal changes from motorised modes. Adequate consideration should be given to recreational users (and enhancing their opportunities), including walking and cycling access to / from railway stations and connections to designated long-distance routes and to other public transport facilities.

- Finally, the role of the planning system should not be overlooked: local authorities and communities throughout the National Park should be involved in emerging Local Plans from the earliest possible stages. Every effort should be made to identify opportunities for access improvements relating to potential housing development sites because it may be possible to create new short circular local routes into the countryside, or to provide 'missing links' in the rights of way network or to enable vulnerable users to have safe off-road paths instead of walking along dangerous roads. Any such opportunities should be added into each relevant Local Plan Policy so as to add weight to the likelihood of these benefits being obtained if / when development takes place. Our experience in the past has indicated that unless such opportunities are identified and included in the Local Plan at this stage, developers are unlikely to agree to subsequent ideas. Similarly, if local communities or users identify instances where any local plan proposals might adversely impact the existing rights of way network, the National Park Authority should consider all the implications very carefully. Improving access, particularly for vulnerable and latent users, should be a primary aim.

It is hoped that the points summarised above will be helpful in the next phases of the PMP review and the Forum looks forward to receiving further information and engagement in due course.

Yours Sincerely,
Ben Marsh

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

Please reply to:

South Downs Local Access Forum
South Downs Centre, North Street, Midhurst, GU29 9DH
Email: access@southdowns.gov.uk

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