

South Downs Local Access Forum

Consultation on the Proposal to Upgrade St Swithun's Way

The South Downs Local Access Forum (SDLAF) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposals relating to St Swithun's Way (SSW) and its potential integration into the National Trails network.

Under Section 94(5) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, all relevant authorities are required to have regard to the advice of Local Access Forums. In addition, the strengthened duty in Section 11A of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, as amended by Section 245 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, requires all local authorities and relevant bodies to *seek to further* National Park purposes and to give greater weight to conserving and enhancing natural beauty, wildlife, and cultural heritage where conflicts arise.

The SDLAF therefore expects that its advice will be given due weight in decision-making, particularly where issues of long-term maintenance, equitable funding, and access provision are concerned.

1. Linking Long Distance Footpaths

- The Forum sees clear merit in linking up properly maintained Long Distance Footpaths. This approach has proven successful elsewhere, such as the evolution of the Cleveland Way into the Wolds Way, Viking Way, and Hereward Way.
- The SSW, now established for over 25 years, offers a sensible opportunity to strengthen Hampshire and Surrey's long distance walking network and connect with the wider National Trails system.

2. Funding for Upgrading St Swithun's Way

- We support the proposal that all initial funding for upgrading the SSW should be sought from DEFRA's 2026/27 Access for All programme.
- However, adequate maintenance funding in subsequent years is a significant concern. Current indications are that maintenance responsibilities would fall to partner organisations already engaged in the North Downs Way and South Downs Way Trail Partnerships.

3. Risks and Responsibilities

- While most of the SSW route lies within Hampshire, the northern section continues into Surrey, linking directly with the North Downs Way. This cross-boundary nature

means that both Hampshire and Surrey authorities, alongside the Trail Partnerships, must be clear about their respective responsibilities.

- In hard pressed financial times, it is questionable whether councils in Kent, East Sussex, or West Sussex would contribute significantly to maintaining a trail largely outside their boundaries.
- There is a risk that extra expenditure on one upgraded long-distance route could come at the expense of maintaining Hampshire's and Surrey's wider rights of way networks.

4. Role of the South Downs National Park and Gateway Settlements

- Approximately 10 miles of the SSW fall within the South Downs National Park. It may therefore be reasonable to expect SDNPA to contribute to regular maintenance of the upgraded trail.
- The Forum also notes that the SSW borders the National Park and passes through gateway settlements such as Alresford and Alton. We recommend that the project actively explores opportunities to improve links between the trail and the National Park, enhancing access for residents and visitors and strengthening the role of gateway communities.
- The Forum encourages early dialogue with SDNPA to clarify expectations and secure equitable funding commitments.

5. Wider Opportunities and International Significance

- The Forum recognises the international significance of the St James' Way, of which the SSW forms part. This historic pilgrimage route from Canterbury to Santiago de Compostela and Fisterra offers Hampshire and Surrey a unique opportunity to participate in an international trail partnership.
- We recommend that the Partnership explicitly acknowledge this international dimension and support continued use of the Camino de Compostela passport in the UK, enabling walkers to connect their journey with the wider European pilgrimage tradition.

6. Equitable Access and Riders' Routes

- The Forum strongly supports efforts to maximise the amount of bridleway provision along the SSW. Where this is not possible, a continuous "riders' route" should be created, following the successful model developed for the North Downs Way.
- This would ensure that equestrians and cyclists can benefit from the upgraded trail, aligning with wider Access for All principles.

7. Equitable Access and Riders' Routes

In summary, the SDLAF believes that upgrading St Swithun's Way could be both sensible and beneficial, particularly for long-distance walkers and riders, if all initial funding is secured from

DEFRA. However, the longer-term implications for maintenance funding must be carefully considered at this stage. Hampshire County Council, Surrey County Council, and the SDNPA are likely to be the principal authorities expected to provide ongoing support, and this must not come at the expense of the wider rights of way networks in both counties.

We urge the Partnerships to:

- Secure DEFRA funding for the initial upgrade.
- Establish clear, equitable maintenance responsibilities across all partner organisations.
- Recognise the international significance of the St James' Way and support its integration into the trail network.
- Ensure bridleway provision or a continuous riders' route is embedded in the upgrade plans.
- Strengthen links between the SSW and the South Downs National Park, particularly through gateway settlements.

The SDLAF trusts that these recommendations will help the Partnership refine its proposals to deliver both local and international benefits, while safeguarding the wider rights of way networks.

Yours faithfully,
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On behalf of
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Chair of the South Downs Local Access Forum

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