

Local Access Forum update

**Doug Jones, SDLAF Chair
National Park Authority Meeting
9 December 2025**

Local Access Forums

- Independent Statutory Bodies; set up by CROW Act (2000)
- Volunteers with relevant experience (inc. 2 SDNPA Members)
- Assist decision-making on Rights of Way Networks, Access Issues, Open Air Recreation and Sustainable Travel
- One per County - plus National Parks
- Provide Formal Advice to which recipients have to have regard
- LAFs have to have regard to 'the needs of land management' and 'the desirability of conserving natural beauty'

South Downs LAF is different to many

- Covers parts of 3 Counties and Brighton & Hove
- Need to be aware of their policies and practices as well as SDNPA's
- About 3,300 km of PROW in the National Park
- The LAF is serviced by SDNPA officers
- Website hosted by SDNPA
- Its work is relevant to both SDNPA Committees

SDLAF in recent years

- 2021-2024: only able to operate at bare minimum because of SDNPA staff reductions
- Now being reinvigorated
- Recruited 7 new members during 2025
- Support from new member of staff
- Initiating pro-active work as well as reactive activities

New members on SDLAF include

- Health & wellbeing
- Climate change
- Wildlife & conservation
- Off-road cycling
- Disabled access / access for all
- Young people & under-represented groups

In addition to user groups, landowners and Public Transport expertise

During 2024 and 2025

The SDLAF has studied and submitted comments on:

- Surrey's Rights of Way Improvement Plan
- East Sussex Local Transport Plan
- Hampshire's proposals to cut all rural bus services
- Review of Hampshire's Byways Policies
- Hampshire's Countryside Access Plan (2025-2035)
- East Sussex Rights of Way Access Plan (2025-2035)
- East Hampshire's LCWIP

During 2024 and 2025

The SDLAF has also studied and submitted comments on:

- Winchester's LCWIP
- South Downs Local Plan Review
- South Downs Partnership Management Plan
- South Downs Active Travel Network Plan
- St Swithun's Way National Trail Upgrade
- Potential Active Travel Routes in the Itchen Corridor
- Significant Planning Applications (most notably the Chyngton Brooks Cuckmere Habitat Restoration Project)

Pro-active initiatives include

- **Survey of all 4 local authorities**

- to obtain benchmark information in the context of budgetary pressures, the new LURA Duty, a new Accord and forthcoming LGR & Devolution arrangements

- **Liaison with Parish Councils about SDNP Local Plan**

- not only about Policies SD19 and SD20 but also about every development allocation: any adverse impacts on the PROW network but also opportunities for access improvements (new short circular routes into the countryside; providing 'missing links' in the network; enabling vulnerable users to have safe off-road paths instead of travelling along dangerous roads)

- **Working jointly with other LAFs re Devolution and LGR**

- will new Unitary Councils bring more fragmentation to Access Policies and Practices?

- raising the profile / importance of Access issues (including Public Transport) with Mayoral candidates: including pressing for Government funding and committing to improve rural public transport, active travel facilities and enhancements to the PROW network

Our Survey of Local Authorities explored

- amounts of PROW in the National Park
- policies, priorities and data
- liaison with user groups
- encouragement for outdoor recreation and access
- barriers to PROW use
- monitoring the state of the network
- types of problems reported
- maintenance and vegetation cutting practices

Findings from our survey

- WSCC manages 55% of the PROW in NP, HCC 24%, ESCC 18%, B&H 3%
- None of the LAs apply any different policies or priorities inside the NP compared with outside
- All the LAs apply management and maintenance practices consistently county-wide
- None of the LAs collect separate data for paths inside the Park
- Should standards be different - what might public expectations be?
- 11,051 reports from the public awaiting investigation / resolution
- Some different practices that could be shared

Findings from the SDNPA's Partnership Management Plan (PMP) research and consultations

- Access into and within SDNP is particularly important and highly valued
- Enables people to understand and enjoy the Special Qualities
- Important for physical and mental health and overall wellbeing
- Important for young people and diverse groups
- Provides access to nature, dark night skies and a living classroom
- Access helps the rural economy and helps towards Net Zero

But significant problems reported during PMP

- Access is increasingly difficult
- Lack of public transport
- Reductions in path maintenance
- Barriers to use include safety (and feeling safe), lack of information and conflicts between users
- Many areas are without any train or bus services at all
- Challenges for visitors and residents
- Comments were similar from rural businesses, the learning network and other partners
- Little involvement of transport operators in the PMP
- SDLAF recommended some improvements

The revised PMP

- “Rights of way network is a jewel in the crown of the South Downs”
- SDLAF disappointed no Target about the condition of rights of way
- Nothing about conflicts or safety
- Now hoped NPA will work with LAs to get some consistent survey data
- A Target for Public Transport has been added – but involvement of transport operators will be important

In conclusion

- It's hoped that the LAF can be helpful to you: a critical friend
- Much of the LAF's focus will be on the relevant Local Authorities: your support can be useful
- Please think about Access issues in all your decisions – including Planning
- Significant issues for your consideration appear to include: data about the condition of the network, byways and other conflicts; improvements through the planning system; public transport; LGR and devolution
- “Traffic spoils tranquillity and poor access keeps people who should be able to visit away.” *The Government's major independent study of National Parks led by John Glover (2019)*