

South Downs

Local Access Forum

ANNUAL REPORT: 2025

FROM THE CHAIR

The South Downs Local Access Forum (SDLAF) is an independent statutory body, comprising individuals appointed in a voluntary capacity to advise the National Park Authority and others on how best to manage access to the countryside in the National Park. Legislation explains that organisations to which advice is provided must have regard to that advice in carrying out their functions.

The enhanced Protected Landscapes Duty placed on a range of organisations by Section 245 of the 2023 Levelling-up and Regeneration Act (LURA) is also now of increasing importance. This is no longer a passive duty and, when performing any functions affecting any land in the National Park, the designated organisations must now actively 'seek to further' the Park Authority's statutory purposes. Whenever there is a conflict between those purposes, they must attach greater weight to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area (the Sandford principle).

The National Park's purposes and duty continue to have a major influence on our work and we endeavour to play a key role in helping the Park Authority pursue these statutory aims by providing balanced advice about improving and increasing the opportunities for people to enjoy the beautiful and varied landscapes that make up the South Downs. Members of the Forum must consider land management requirements as well as conservation of the natural beauty of the area.

This is my second report as Chair and it has been a busy year with plenty of important business to consider. I would like to thank all the Forum members who give up their time freely, including some who need to take time off work, and also the SDNPA and its staff for their support. Reductions in the size of the National Park Authority's access team in previous years had had a significant effect on its ability to handle its workload and to service the Local Access Forum but changes made in 2025 have enabled the Forum to be revived and re-invigorated.

Amongst other things we have:

- benefitted from support from a new member of SDNPA staff
- recruited seven new members to the Forum
- held more meetings than in preceding years
- submitted more responses to a wider range of consultations and
- initiated a number of new pro-active projects.

As well as representing land managers and recreational users of the countryside, the SDLAF now has members who represent a range of other interests including: health & wellbeing, climate change, wildlife & conservation, disabled access / access for all, young people & under-represented groups and public transport. The 2025 members are listed elsewhere in this report and we look forward to another productive year in 2026.

Doug Jones
Chair, South Downs Local Access Forum

ACTIVITIES DURING 2025

There were four meetings of the Forum during 2025 and members also remained on a joint Subgroup with representatives of Hampshire's Access Forum which was reviewing the management of byways. Although the outcome of Hampshire's review had been anticipated early in 2025 nothing was received by the Forum during the year and no meetings of the Subgroup were held. The Forum undertook a number of other activities during the year and these are also summarised below.

SDLAF Meetings

In February the Forum received a presentation from SDNPA Planning Officers about the review of the Authority's Local Plan. It was agreed to submit a response during the consultation period and, as a pro-active step, it was resolved to encourage Parish Councils to respond: highlighting potential access issues and opportunities for improvements. The meeting also considered draft proposals for Surrey's Rights of Way Improvement Plan, Winchester's Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan, the East Sussex Rights of Way Action Plan and the National Park Authority's Partnership Management Plan. It was agreed that advice from the Forum would be submitted to each one. During the meeting it was noted that there were some variations between the counties and that Local Authority representatives were now rarely ever able to attend SDLAF meetings. As a first step towards improving engagement it was agreed to collect information about Rights of Way management, maintenance, parish engagement and other matters through a survey. It was also agreed to recruit new members to the Forum, focusing on underrepresented themes.

In May SDNPA officers described the Government's plans for Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation in Hampshire and Sussex. The Forum feared that, unless the SDNPA made strong arguments to Government and to others, Rights of Way management could become fragmented, making coordination within the National Park more complex. It was felt that new Unitary Authorities should be able to collaborate on access issues and that the SDNPA should consider whether it could provide the service more efficiently itself, subject to receiving the necessary resources. The SDNPA should also monitor and influence emerging proposals from each of the Mayoral Authorities closely. The meeting also considered opportunities provided by additional capital funding from DEFRA for access improvements in the National Park. A number of suggestions were made, including liaising with the Partnerships between Local Authorities and bus operators to help improve public transport. Consideration was also given to Hampshire's draft Countryside Access Plan and to emerging proposals in the SDNPA's Partnership Management Plan. There was concern about the omission of 'reducing conflict when it occurs' (despite 49% of online survey comments identifying dangerous byways as a barrier for walkers and cyclists) and about the lack of any targets for public transport.

The September meeting focused on opportunities to influence the important South Downs Partnership Management Plan (PMP) and the National Park's Active Travel Network Plan as well as considering results from the Forum's survey of the four Local Authority Rights of Way teams. The Access Targets in the PMP were still felt to be inadequate and suggestions for improvements were recommended including a target for the condition of Rights of Way throughout the National Park and the addition of at least one target for public transport. Amongst other findings, the SDLAF survey revealed that none of the councils apply any different policies or priorities inside the National Park compared with outside and none collect separate data for Rights of Way inside the Park. The Forum questioned whether standards should be different and what public expectations might be.

In December the Forum considered its role in helping to influence the policies and practices of the prospective new Strategic Mayoral Authorities and new Unitary Authorities, including plans to work closely with other Local Access Forums in Hampshire and Sussex. Consultations considered included the major planning application at Chyngton Brooks, active travel routes in the Itchen corridor and proposals for the St Swithun's Way. Final comments on the SDNPA's PMP were made, an update on the SDNPA's Active Travel Network Plan was discussed and the importance of improving the Forum's website noted.

Actions, activities and advice

Survey of Local Authorities

The Forum undertook a survey in 2025 to assess the current access and rights of way situation across the National Park. This was prompted by several factors, including the Park's 15-year milestone and review of its Management Plan; budget pressures on many organisations; the likelihood of local government reorganisation, with new councils assuming access and related responsibilities; a likely review of the joint 'Accord for the management of Rights of Way and Access' within the Park; and the opportunity to identify good practice, highlight shared issues and inform future funding bids. The survey explored policies, priorities and data; engagement with user groups; barriers to rights of way use; monitoring network condition; types of problems reported; and approaches to maintenance and vegetation management. The findings showed that none of the councils apply any different policies or priorities inside the National Park compared with outside it (and no separate data for routes within the Park is collected) despite the LURA legislation and public expectations. All the results have been shared with National Park staff for consideration.

Presentation to National Park Authority meeting

As a result of SDLAF requests, the Chair provided a comprehensive update about the Forum's work at the Authority Meeting in December. As well as raising awareness about access issues and about the Forum, the presentation drew attention to access problems reported in the NPA's Partnership Management consultations and issues raised by the Forum's own survey. It was recognised that access into and within the National Park is particularly important but that the SDNPA has no direct control and very little data or information. It was felt that the SDNPA should ensure that all local authorities and transport operators play a full role and address important issues in the future.

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation

The Forum took an early interest in the prospect of a review of local government structures and boundaries across Hampshire and Sussex. It was felt that, at the very least, proposals could bring uncertainty and the potential loss of corporate knowledge at a time when access to the countryside remains very important for people's physical and mental wellbeing. Contact was made with other Access Forums in the counties with the aim of working together to raise the profile of access issues and responsibilities. Until late in the year, Government plans included elections for the strategic Mayors in May 2026, so the Forum focused on preparing Joint LAF statements for candidates and their teams, seeking to ensure that access issues – including both Rights of Way and Public Transport – were not overlooked among many competing pressures and responsibilities. A subsequent initiative linked to the creation of new Unitary Councils was also envisaged. Towards the end of the year, however, the Government announced that the Mayoral elections due in 2026 would be postponed until 2028 with Unitary Council elections likely in 2027. The Forum had already raised concerns that Rights of Way management could become fragmented amongst Unitary Councils, increasing the challenge of coordination by the National Park Authority, and had urged the SDNPA to make strong representations to Government and others to avoid adverse impacts.

Working with other Local Access Forums

In addition to working with the New Forest LAF and the Hampshire Forum on devolution and local government reorganisation, the Forum also made exploratory contact with other LAFs to consider opportunities for joint working on relevant issues in the future.

Parish Councils and the South Downs Local Plan

The Forum contacted Parish Councils in February to encourage them to consider any access implications of proposals in the Draft Local Plan and to submit comments to the SDNPA during the consultation period. It was explained that new development can create opportunities for access improvements but may also have adverse effects. Early suggestions for new circular routes, missing links or safe off-road paths for vulnerable users (instead of walking along busy roads) are more likely to be included in the Plan than comments made at later stages.

Advice on the South Downs Local Plan

SDLAF also submitted its own advice to SDNPA during the consultation period, reiterating the importance of identifying opportunities for access improvements linked to development sites, including those suggested by communities. Proposed changes to a number of existing policies were welcomed, along with the inclusion of 'active travel'. The Forum stressed that any proposals with potential adverse impacts on Rights of Way should be considered very carefully, particularly in relation to vulnerable or latent users. A proposal to remove the requirement for 'appropriate signage' from one access policy was questioned, with SDLAF highlighting that inadequate signage is often perceived as a barrier by potential users.

Advice on Local Authority Access Plans

During 2025, the Forum had opportunities to comment on draft Local Authority Access Plans in Surrey, East Sussex and Hampshire. In each case, SDLAF advice stressed that greater regard should be paid to the enhanced Protected Landscapes duty introduced by the 2023 Levelling-up and Regeneration Act (LURA). SDLAF explained that it would expect different policies to apply within the National Park compared with other areas, and that greater attention should be paid to Government guidance on functional connectivity between a Protected Landscape and its setting. The prioritisation of safety issues and the recognition of inconsiderate behaviour between users in the Surrey Plan were welcomed but were felt to be lacking elsewhere. The Forum advised that safety concerns, limited information and a lack of confidence are commonly seen as barriers to Rights of Way use. Surrey was also commended for achieving a 70% response rate from Parish Councils, who can reflect a wide range of perspectives, and for proactively seeking solutions to the impacts of climate change. It was felt that conflicts between users, particularly in parts of Hampshire within the National Park, should be better addressed and that, in several areas, more could be done to attract new and more diverse users, especially vulnerable groups. The need for more sustainable transport was also identified as requiring greater attention. Unfortunately, it was not always clear whether SDLAF's advice was brought to the attention of the relevant elected decision-makers. Neither the advice from the Hampshire Access Forum nor that from SDLAF was referenced in the Council's Executive Lead Member Decision Report. It is therefore uncertain whether the decision-maker was able to have regard to the Forums' advice, as required under Section 94(5) of the CROW Act 2000.

Byways Sub-group with the Hampshire Countryside Access Forum

There were no meetings of this Sub-group in 2025 although County Council proposals to revise its policies had been anticipated early in the year. In 2022 the SDNPA had agreed that some communities are disproportionately affected by the use of motorised vehicles on these 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 had decided to rely on action by the County Council.

Advice on the SDNP Partnership Management Plan

The Forum considered the SDNP PMP at each of its meetings in 2025, as the research was analysed and proposals developed, and the SDLAF Chair was an active member of the PMP Steering Group. Advice and comments were provided to the SDNPA at all stages. In March the importance of access into and within the National Park was stressed but increasing difficulties of access were listed, including: the lack of public transport, decreasing amounts of path maintenance and other barriers to use such as safety and conflicts between users. Suggestions for improvements were provided. Advice and comments were provided again in July, drawing attention to key findings from PMP engagement and research, a lack of focus on the condition of Rights of Way, limited recognition of other barriers to use (including those affecting under-represented groups), and the continued absence of any target to improve public transport. Further suggestions to improve the PMP were made. In December, the Forum noted that a public transport target had been included in the final draft PMP (to expand services to key visitor hubs and gateway towns), but that there was still no challenging target relating to the condition of Rights of Way, nor sufficient attention to conflicts or safety. The Forum recommended that the SDNPA work with local authorities to obtain consistent survey data and involve public transport operators more closely in delivering the PMP's aims.

Looking ahead

The ongoing challenges of devolution, local government reorganisation and continuing funding pressures are likely to affect the focus that local authorities can give to access issues in 2026.

Although the Mayoral elections originally due in May have been postponed until 2028, it is understood that some powers and funding may still become available in 2026. Both Hampshire and Sussex therefore appear to be pressing ahead with the establishment of new Mayoral Authorities.

These new bodies will bring powers, influence and funding, although their focus and direction is yet to be shaped. They offer potential for renewed ambition and momentum. The Forum will therefore continue to advise SDNPA and work with it when possible to help ensure that the access priorities of the new authorities — including public transport — support the needs of the National Park.

It will also be important for the SDNPA to work closely with other key partners and position itself as a valued contributor to the new authorities, helping them to deliver their objectives, attract funding and avoid fragmentation of access issues across the Park. While seeking a seat at the top tables may be valuable, much can also be done by influencing their supporting groups and delivery teams.

While disappointed with the South Downs Partnership Management Plan targets for Rights of Way condition, reducing conflicts and for public transport, the Forum is likely to continue to encourage the SDNPA to try to address these matters and to obtain consistent survey data and strengthened engagement with bus and rail operators.

The Forum will aim to play a full advisory role through both proactive and responsive work. It will also seek to raise public awareness by enhancing its website, holding meetings in a wider range of locations, and continuing joint working with other Local Access Forums.

SDLAF Members

Name	Interest
Lucy Austen	Health & wellbeing (from July)
Paul Bevan	SDNPA Member (from November)
Tim Burr	SDNPA Member (until August)
Merovee Churton	Land Agent
Bob Damper	Cycling
Carolyn Fair	Farmer and horse riding
Sean Howell	Off-road Cycling (from July)
Simon James	Forestry Commission
Richard Johnson	Public transport
Doug Jones	Walking and public transport
Glynn Jones	Land management and conservation
Lipika Mandal	Accessibility advocate (from July)
Roger Mullenger	Walk leader
Virginia Pullen	Biodiversity and conservation (from July)
Andrew Shaxson	SDNPA Member
Chris Todd	Transport and climate change (from July)
James Tulley	Young people and under-represented groups (from July)
John Vannuffel	Trail motorcyclist
Robert Whitcombe	Land manager