

SOUTH DOWNS

LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

ANNUAL REPORT:
APRIL 2015–
DECEMBER 2016

A FEW WORDS FROM THE CHAIRMAN

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This year we have changed our reporting to cover calendar years, so this report covers part of 2015 and all of 2016. This is my second report year as Chairman and we have seen some excellent contributions from speakers, National Park Authority staff and South Downs Local Access Forum (SDLAF) members. Discussion has always been constructive enabling us to offer advice that we hope has been useful and reflects the interests and expertise of a wide range of knowledge, opinion and experience.

I would like to thank the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) and its staff for its continued and enthusiastic support. This is very welcome at a time when other Local Access Forums are suffering from lack of resources from their sponsoring bodies, primarily due to local government cut-backs. The SDNPA has also experienced financial pressures but despite a reorganisation, support from the SDNPA has continued at all levels of the organisation and has been a major factor in our ability to provide good advice.

I would like to thank in particular the SDLAF members, all of whom give up their time freely, and some of whom have to take time off work.

Roger Mullenger

Chairman, South Downs Local Access Forum



KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

MEON VALLEY TRAIL

In 2015, South Downs Local Access Forum (SDLAF) Member, Russell Cleaver, became involved in the upgrade of the Meon Valley Trail (MVT), culminating in the successful opening and use of this excellent route.

Once a railway line running from Fareham to Alton transporting local livestock and agricultural produce, the MVT is now a shared-use path extending 11 miles from West Meon in the north to Wickham in the south. In 2015, Hampshire County Council, as landowners and managers of the Trail, began a major project to upgrade the route, removing trees and laying a new surface. A small group of existing users were very vocal in their criticism of changes to the surface.



South Downs LAF members visit the Meon Valley Trail in October 2016, accompanied by visitors from the New Forest LAF (© SDNPA)

As a result of the concerns, Hampshire County Council asked the SDLAF for an independent review of the Trail's new surface. Following discussions at a SDLAF meeting, Russell Cleaver undertook to review the works. Consequently Russell wrote two reports, the first, at an early stage, recommended the contractor undertake additional works in some locations. The second report was undertaken after the 2015/2016 winter, to assess the effects of the winter weather on the surface. He found that the winter weather had bedded in the Trail surface very satisfactorily and that the surface of most of the Trail is now in a good to excellent condition. Vegetation has regrown and new signage interprets the route, making this an excellent trail for walking, cycling and horse riding.

The SDLAF visited the MVT in October 2016 and saw how well it was being used. This project is an excellent example of how the SDLAF can contribute to solve issues of access for all users.

IPING COMMON

Iping Common is a lowland heath on the Wealden Greensand in the South Downs National Park. Lowland heaths are not a natural environment but created over many years by commoners grazing cattle and taking wood. Without this use heaths rapidly become scrub, then finally woodland.

Over the past three years Sussex Wildlife Trust have been consulting on, then proposing, the fencing of Iping Common, near Midhurst so that grazing could be re-started. Lowland heaths like Iping have become rare and disjointed and the management required is too great for volunteers, and extremely expensive when done professionally. The Sussex Wildlife Trust presented their proposals to the SDLAF at an early stage and Members agreed that access for walkers and horse riders was well provided for, so with a couple of suggestions the SDLAF was pleased to support the proposals.



Iping Common near Midhurst (© John Dominick)

Erecting fencing on a common requires permission from the Secretary of State. As an objection to the proposal was lodged, a public inquiry was triggered. The inquiry was held during 2016 and the SDLAF made a representation supporting the proposals and the work that had been done to take access into account while providing a good solution for the environment. The outcome of the inquiry was that the Inspector found in favour of the applicant (the Sussex Wildlife Trust) and granted permission for the proposed fencing.

The SDNPA partnership project, Heathlands Reunited, which is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, will be helped by the preservation of existing lowland heath like Iping Common.

EAST SUSSEX COUNTY COUNCIL (ESCC) COUNTRYSIDE MANAGEMENT

In 2016, ESCC consulted the SDLAF about the proposed new strategy for the management of its countryside sites, some of which are in or adjacent to the South Downs National Park (SDNP). One of the options presented was the disposal of some key sites to other organisations, particularly those with conservation and visitors in mind.

After serious consideration of the potential impact on the National Park and the South Downs Way National Trail, the SDLAF wrote with advice regarding these proposals.



Cuckmere Haven, East Sussex. (© SDNPA/Sam Moore)

SDLAF did not agree with the concept of disposing of assets for several reasons, particularly the resulting loss of control of sensitive areas and the risk of reduced access. Also, the ongoing maintenance costs and risks would mean it unlikely that ESCC would obtain anything like a reasonable value from the proposed sale.

In particular, it was felt that any proposals to dispose of, or lose control, of the iconic Cuckmere Haven would be unacceptable. This is an asset of national importance appearing on international tourism advertising and should be treated as such.

RIVER ROTHER CANOE ACCESS

The issue of canoe access on the River Rother first came to the attention of the SDLAF in 2014 and discussions have continued into 2016. During the period covered by this report, two SDLAF members

attended meetings with riparian owners and representatives of Canoe England regarding the canoeists desire for free access to the river using the navigation rights which were established in the 1800s. It is disputed whether the navigation rights are still applicable. Eventually, after meeting with all parties, there was some agreement that, in parts of the river, some more controlled access could be accepted, but that free access would not be acceptable to riparian owners. The SDLAF agreed to take part in any future meetings between canoeists and riparian owners if requested.

CONSULTATIONS AND STRATEGIC ADVICE

During this reporting period the SDLAF has been consulted by a wide range of bodies on subjects as diverse as bus stop closures, Department for Transport (DfT) and Local Authority strategies for Cycling and Walking and restrictions on Access Land. Below are some examples of consultations and strategic advice given by the SDLAF this year.

- We gave advice to the Sussex Ramblers regarding the Don't Lose Your Way Project and recommended they adopt a similar approach to the *Providing Access to Hampshire's Heritage (PATHH)* project.
- We heard from the Egrets Way Committee about proposals to connect the new shared-use path with the wider rights of way network.
- The SDLAF was consulted on a review of the long term access restriction at Cheriton Wood and the subsequent proposals to extend the restriction for a further six years. We supported the proposed extension whilst recommending the SDNPA and landowner explore options for extending public access in the future.
- We responded to the DfT's consultation on its draft Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy, giving particular advice on the importance of making good provision for links between urban and rural areas.
- The SDLAF was represented at a public inquiry concerning the proposed extinguishment of a footpath level crossing at Buriton in Hampshire. Despite strong representation at the inquiry the Inspector eventually confirmed the closure of the crossing.



SDLAF MEMBERS

Name	Interest
Val Bateman	Horse riding
Russell Cleaver	Countryside Management, Volunteer Ranger Service
Bob Damper	Cycling
Sue Dunkley	Disabled access
Andy Hannaford	Education and adventure recreation
Neville Harrison	SDNPA Member (walker)
Simon James	Forestry Commission
Richard Johnson	Public transport
Glynn Jones	South Downs Society
Roger Mullenger	Walking leader, conservation
Karen Roberts	SDNPA Member
Isabel Swift	Land agent
David Taylor	Land manager
Susan Thompson	Cycling
John Vannuffel	Trail motorcyclist
Robert Whitcombe	Land manager

MEETINGS

Date	No. of Members	No. of Officers*	No. of Observers
22 April 2015	12	6	10
28 July 2015	10	6	5
27 October 2015	9	6	4
12 January 2016	12	6	6
26 April 2016	9	6	6
20 July 2016	14	3	3
21 October 2016	13	2	8

* Incl. administrator / minute taker

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NATIONAL PARK

