

SOUTH DOWNS

LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

ANNUAL REPORT 2017/18

A FEW WORDS FROM THE CHAIRMAN

The South Downs Local Access Forum (SDLAF) is a group of 17 individuals appointed in a voluntary capacity to give advice to various government authorities and other bodies on how to provide good or improved access to land for open-air recreation and enjoyment. Members of the SDLAF must consider land management requirements as well as conservation of the natural beauty of the area. A Local Access Forum (LAF) is a statutory body and, by law, the organisations that it advises must take note of the advice.

Members of the SDLAF are appointed by the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) and reflect the views of both land managers and recreational users of the countryside. The SDLAF may also have members who represent the interests of conservation, tourism, people with disabilities, transport or other interests. The members and the interests they represent are on the last page.

This is my third and last report year as Chairman. The three years have passed quickly during which there have been some very interesting presentations, consultations and projects. The last year has seen excellent contributions from speakers, National Park Authority staff and 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 interests, knowledge, opinion and experience.

I would like to thank the SDNPA and its staff for its continued and full support. This is very welcome when other LAFs have suffered from lack of resources from their sponsoring bodies, primarily because of local government cut-backs, which are also affecting SDNP.

I would like to thank in particular the forum members all of whom have given up their time freely, including some who need to take time off work.

Roger Mullenger

Chair, South Downs Local Access Forum



KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

PERMISSIVE PATHS & BRIDLEWAYS

About seven years ago the Environmental Countryside Stewardship scheme removed the provision of payments for enhancing the Rights of Way network by the addition of new and upgraded permissive routes, which were in place for ten years. Sometimes new paths were created, or higher rights given to existing paths eg: to permit horse riding. As Stewardship agreements come to an end many of these permissive access agreements have lapsed or will do so in the next four years.

Members undertook a project to review all permissive paths created under stewardship agreements within the SDNP and to evaluate paths against a set of agreed criteria. Each path was visited and given a score based on its value in terms of connectivity to the wider RoW network, path condition, evidence of use, and landscape value in terms of views and interest to users.

SDLAF intend to contact the landowners of the highest scoring routes to attempt to keep these paths accessible to the public on a permissive basis beyond the end date of the agreements.

This review highlighted some of the benefits and shortcomings of the existing stewardship scheme and our views will be fed into the consultations for any new countryside schemes following Brexit.

Our thanks to the many volunteers who evaluated the routes; LAF members, rangers and the South Downs Society ("Friends of the South Downs").

FOOTPATH EXTINGUISHMENT REVIEW AT FITTLEWORTH

The LAF was asked to comment on a proposed path extinguishment in West Sussex.

Four LAF members walked the RoW in question, and the nearby paths unaffected by the extinguishment order. The on-site review highlighted issues which were not obvious from the maps and description in the published documentation. The result was that the members unanimously agreed that the extinguishment should be objected to, and a majority thought a small diversion may be advantageous to the landowner.

The main lesson learnt from this exercise was that, for important issues like this, nothing can replace a site visit so that accessibility, landscape context, views and architecture can be properly taken into account.

Subsequently the Planning Inspector made the decision not to grant the extinguishment order.

SDNPA PARTNERSHIP MANAGEMENT PLAN REVIEW

The South Downs National Park Authority began the process of reviewing the Partnership Management Plan for the National Park. Officers led SDLAF members through an exercise to consider the existing Access and Transport policies and whether they were still relevant to the National Park. Where appropriate members made recommendations for changes or additions to the policies. LAF Members also reviewed the PMP indicators and discussed the usefulness of these. The review of the Plan is on-going with a revised and updated plan and delivery action plan to be launched in 2019.



Horse riding near Ditchling Beacon (© Eddie Howland)

LAF MEMBER SURVEY

The members of the LAF were surveyed, anonymously, on the working of the LAF. This was generally positive but some changes were made as a result of the comments.

CONSULTATIONS AND STRATEGIC ADVICE

In 2017 the South Downs LAF took part in several consultation exercises, both local and national and gave strategic advice on a number of local issues. Items of particular note are detailed below:

WEST SUSSEX COUNTY COUNCIL (WSCC) - RIGHTS OF WAY IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Jane Noble of WSCC ran a session in advance of the preparation of the WSCC Rights of Way Management Plan, the draft plan was subsequently launched for public consultation and the SDLAF submitted a detailed response to this in January 2018.



Cycling on the Downs Link (© SDNPA)



BUS SERVICES BILL (NOW BUS SERVICES ACT)

The Department for Transport consulted widely on Draft Regulation and Guidance associated with the Bus Services Bill. The SDLAF's response raised concerns about the loss and reduction of bus services in the South Downs National Park and highlighted specific examples where local residents and visitors have experienced difficulties in accessing parts of the National Park; where young people and others without access to a car have been unable to travel to employment, and where older residents have found themselves unable to access amenities and essential services in nearby towns. The SDLAF urged the government to make sure that any new guidance makes clear that decisions about services should take full account of the need for access to and within National Parks. In concluding the SDLAF recommended the inclusion, in the Guidance, of a reference to both the Section 62 duty on Transport Authorities to take National Park purposes into account as well as the relevance of the visitor economy and the role of bus services in supporting this sector in National Parks when considering the business case for bus services.



Concern about the loss and reduction of bus services in the South Downs National Park (© SDNPA)

WEST SUSSEX COUNTY COUNCIL (WSCC) – SHARED USE PATH AT DEVILS DYKE

LAF member Glynn Jones gave a presentation on a proposed shared use path promoted by the National Trust. The new path would provide an off-road connection between an existing path out of Brighton and the Devil's Dyke monument and amenities. The proposed scheme was well received by the Forum and a letter of support was sent to the National Trust, WSCC and the SDNPA.



Devil's Dyke at sunset (© SDNPA)

SDNPA CYCLING AND WALKING STRATEGY

A presentation was given about the development of the Cycling and Walking Strategy. The aim of the strategy is to set out the Authority's ambitions for cycling and walking in the National Park and to guide future priorities. This was not a formal consultation but LAF members made various constructive comments.



Walkers in West Sussex (© SDNPA)

NEW SIGNAGE ON THE SOUTH DOWNS WAY

Officers reported on plans to replace old fingerposts with new signs incorporating the shared identity graphics. The new signs, a little larger than their predecessors, look eye-catching and will help to promote greater awareness of the National Park. The new signs also aim to be more informative for the public by displaying icons for the user-type that can legally use the right of way.



New fingerposts installed near Buriton (© SDNPA)



SDLAF MEMBERS

Name	Interest
Val Bateman	Horse riding
Russell Cleaver	Countryside Management, Volunteer Ranger Service
Annie Brown	Land manager, farmer
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
Doug Jones	SDNPA Member
Glynn Jones	South Downs Society
Roger Mullenger	Walk leader
Edward Seymour	Land agent
Ben Taylor	Land manager, farmer
Susan Thompson	Cycling
John Vannuffel	Trail motorcyclist
Robert Whitcombe	Land Manager

MEETINGS

Date	No. of Members	No. of Officers*	No. of Observers
16 February 2017	12	4	5
25 April 2017	Meeting cancelled due to illness		
26 July 2017	9	5	3
30 November 2017	11	6	3

* Including secretary/minute taker

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