

# South Downs

## Local Access Forum

### **ANNUAL REPORT: 2024**

#### **FROM THE CHAIR**

The South Downs Local Access Forum (SDLAF) is a group of 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 a range of other interests and the 2024 members are listed elsewhere in this report.

This is my first report as Chair having been elected to the position in October 2024. I would like put on record my sincere thanks to Bob Damper, my predecessor, for all his hard work and dedication through some challenging times. The National Park Authority had reduced its access team by 25% which had a significant effect on the Authority's ability to handle its workload and to service the Local Access Forum.

I would also like thank all the other 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.

The National Park's purposes and duty will continue to have a major influence on our work and we will 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.

The enhanced Protected Landscapes Duty placed on a range of organisations by Section 245 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 will also be relevant to our opportunities.

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. If it appears that 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.

After an unexpected reduction in the frequency of meetings in the last few years, and with the Forum only able to operate at a bare minimum because of SDNPA staff reductions, it was possible to hold two meetings in 2024 (January and October). It is pleasing that the SDNPA has subsequently been able to improve its staffing situation and a fuller programme of meetings for 2025 is now envisaged – with plenty of important business to consider.

Doug Jones  
Chair, South Downs Local Access Forum

## **ACTIVITIES DURING 2024**

There were two meetings of the Forum during 2024 and members also worked with the Hampshire Countryside Access Forum to review the management of byways. The Forum made submissions to proposals for walking & cycling improvements, cuts in passenger transport and local transport plans in a number of parts of the National Park.

### SDLAF Meetings

At the January meeting the main item considered was a presentation from Hampshire County Council about the review of their Countryside Access Plan (CAP). The Forum welcomed suggestions that the County Council would aim to get involved in the planning system at earlier stages and that they would develop improved liaison with parish councils to help identify issues and find extra local volunteers for path maintenance. The Forum also stressed that it would expect to see different policies applying in National Parks compared with the rest of the county and that this should encompass retaining amenity, character, heritage, nature and habitats. It was also suggested that the County Council should be looking to attract potential users to the Rights of Way network and that this may require new policies in the CAP if people are currently discouraged by danger or safety issues, something which was felt to be particularly important for vulnerable users and for health & wellbeing improvements. Representatives of the Forum were invited to join a joint Access Forum Working Group to consider the topic of Byways with members of Hampshire's Countryside Access Forum. There was also a discussion about whether the Forum or National Park Authority could acquire a better picture of the Rights of Way situation across the whole Park. It was recognised that National Park Authorities are supposed to collect data within their areas but the methodology used by other Park Authorities was not suitable here and there are no resources available at SDNPA to do any monitoring.

The October meeting considered the opportunity for the South Downs to produce its own Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan which would look to fill gaps between existing, generally urban-focused LCWIPs and improve connectivity between urban and rural areas. The SDNPA would need to collaborate with Active Travel England and the Highways Authorities as well as aligning with the National Park's Local Plan and the Partnership Management Plan. The meeting also received presentations about the reviews of the SDNPA's Local Plan and the Partnership Management Plan which would both welcome inputs from Forum Members during 2025. Hampshire County Council provided an update about progress with the review of their Countryside Access Plan and, as at the January meeting, it was stressed that the Forum would expect to see different policies applying in National Parks compared with the rest of the county. Formal consultation on this CAP is anticipated early in 2025. The Forum's response to the East Hampshire District Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan was also developed at this meeting.

### Other activities

#### **Byways Sub-group with the Hampshire Countryside Access Forum**

Hampshire County Council invited members of SDLAF to join members of HCAF in a joint sub-group to help review the County Council's policies and practices on this topic. Meetings took place in February, June and December. The National Park Authority had reviewed the management of Byways Open to All Traffic in the Hampshire area of the Park in a workshop meeting in January 2022 and at the Authority meeting of October 2022. The SDNPA had agreed that some communities are disproportionately affected by the use of motorised vehicles on these public 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 decided not to take the lead in assessing and potentially making Traffic Regulation Orders but would continue the partnership arrangements with the County Council to review the situation. The outcome of Hampshire's review is anticipated early in 2025.

### **East Sussex Local Transport Plan 4 consultation**

In February the Forum responded to this consultation explaining that, whilst the proposals appeared to contain many good aims and aspirations, delivery would be crucial. Aims to mitigate climate change, to improve health and wellbeing, and to support the local economy were all welcomed but reliance was being placed on moving journeys from transport modes with greater carbon emissions (such as cars) towards walking, wheeling, cycling and public transport by promoting public transport and active travel. This would require the development and delivery of bus service enhancements (to ensure that more people would be well served by reliable, frequent, and high-quality services) and the provision of active travel infrastructure to encourage walking and cycling for short and medium length trips. The Forum pointed out that the sections of the Plan relating to responsibilities and to funding / financing were not clear about how many of the proposals could actually be delivered. It was also pointed out that there was very little mention of, or commitment to, public transport in rural areas – including within the South Downs National Park – although all the over-arching aims and ambitions should be equally important here.

### **Hampshire County Council Future Services Consultation: proposals relating to Passenger Transport**

In March the Forum responded to proposals for a far-reaching package of measures which would have included the withdrawal of all County Council funding for bus services that it was not legally required to provide. The SDLAF felt that the proposals would hit the South Downs National Park area very hard: not just for resident communities but also for visitors, including those trying to use any of the 'Long Distance Trails' including the South Downs Way, Meon Valley Trail, Hangers Way, Shipwrights Way, Staunton Way, Wayfarers Walk and Writers Way. None of the bus routes connecting with these popular long distance routes was due to be retained. The Forum also pointed out that the cuts would also threaten the National Park's ambitions of 'A National Park for All' and its aims of making sure that the area is available to everyone, inclusive and enjoyed by all. Although there would still be rail services to Winchester, Petersfield, Liphook, Liss and Rowlands Castle, there were no proposals to retain any bus services from any of these stations to take anyone out into the National Park. In addition about 30 villages in the National Park were likely to lose the last remnants of their bus services. The Forum also stressed that transport is already one, if not the biggest, barrier to accessing the countryside for many people. The Government's Review of National Parks (the Glover Review) had concluded that "traffic spoils tranquillity and poor access keeps people who should be able to visit away." Other potentially adverse effects were also pointed out and it was therefore felt that the County Council should think very carefully before deciding whether or not to continue with such far-reaching proposals.

### **East Hampshire District Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan**

In November the Forum submitted comments to Hampshire County Council about this LCWIP. The submission highlighted that there seemed to be relatively little regard to (or mention of) the existence of the National Park in the plan and that the LCWIP should be looking to improve access (by walking and cycling) into and within the National Park – as well as seeking modal changes from motorised modes. There also appeared to be a lack of integration with Land Use planning in the National Park parts of the plan area and an overall perception that the LCWIP was rather urban orientated and that recreational users / opportunities should get more consideration. The submission noted that a number of designated long-distance walking and cycling routes pass through the area and opportunities to improve each one should be considered as part of the LCWIP. It was also recommended that, as the East Hampshire District borders the Chichester District in West Sussex, adequate liaison should take place to ensure that cross-boundary issues and opportunities were not overlooked.

## LOOKING AHEAD

At the time of writing this Annual Report, a number of opportunities and threats may be visible on the horizon for 2025.

It is very promising that the National Park Authority has been able to find funding to improve the staffing situation for its Access Team, with a new post able to start servicing the Local Access Forum properly again. Combined with a full programme of Forum meetings, this should enable both reactive and proactive work to be undertaken.

Reviews of existing Rights of Way Improvement Plans are likely to be underway across much of the National Park during 2025 and there is also the prospect of the National Park Authority producing its first ever Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). There will also be opportunities for the Forum to provide inputs into both the Park Authority's Local Plan Review and the review of the South Downs Partnership Management Plan which can help guide the work of all those with responsibilities or an interest in the national park.

But there could be threats to the management and improvement of public access to the countryside during 2025, too. Significant funding shortfalls for local authorities over recent years are likely to continue, often squeezing out and reducing resources for countryside services. In addition, the National Park Authority's own financial settlements from Government have been on a flat-cash basis for a number of years and this inevitably diminishes in value due to the effects of inflation.

There is also the prospect of a significant review of local government structures and boundaries across the National Park during 2025, perhaps bringing uncertainty and the potential loss of corporate knowledge at a time when access to the countryside continues to be very important for people's physical and mental wellbeing.

The Access Forum will try to play a full advisory role in relation to these challenges and make the most of the opportunities so that people can enjoy the beautiful and varied landscapes that make up the South Downs National Park.

### SDLAF Members

Name	Interest
Tim Burr	SDNPA Member
Bob Damper	Cycling
Sue Dunkley	Disabled access
Carolyn Fair	Farmer and horse riding
Simon James	Forestry Commission
Richard Johnson	Public transport
Doug Jones	Walking and public transport
Glynn Jones	Land management and conservation
Roger Mullenger	Walk leader
Andrew Shaxson	SDNPA Member
Susan Thompson	Cycling
John Vannuffel	Trail motorcyclist
Robert Whitcombe	Land manager