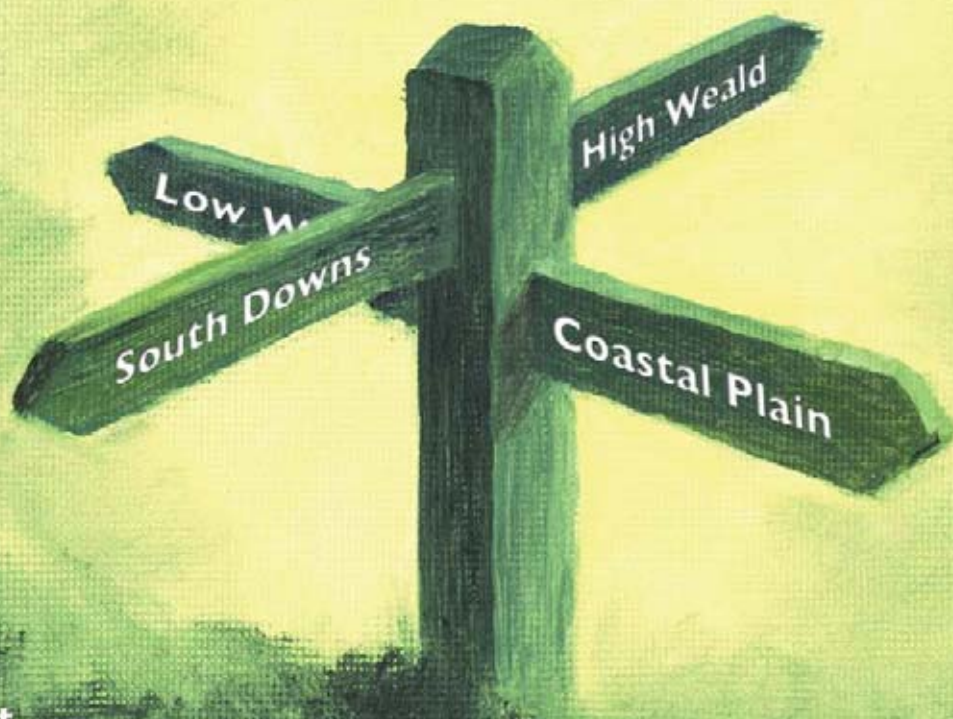




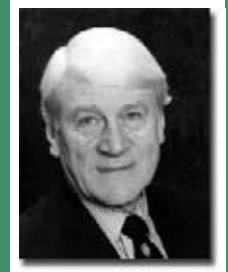
Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex

Annual Report

April 2004 - March 2005



It is obvious from the coverage of this report that the Forum has not only adjusted well to the challenge presented by the developing opportunities of its role in implementing the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, but that it has produced a wealth of suggestions for rights of way improvement. These suggestions have been achieved through the committed work of the four Sub Fora.



The main Forum, now styled the Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex, has the welcome but somewhat daunting task of putting together this wealth of material so that it can give independent and well founded advice to the Highway Authority on the style and content of its Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP). The changing timetable for this process has not assisted the coherence of the process although the slightly longer period now available will help. It is still not entirely clear how far reaching such advice has to be but opinion seems to be hardening on the need to provide major long-term objectives with details of short-term specific projects for achievement in, say, a three year rolling programme which will require constant monitoring, evaluation and revision. Time will tell.

All this means a continuing workload for the Forum. Since it is statutorily independent it might also mean that, in time, it could become the vehicle for influential advice from the whole range of countryside amenity groups, land managers and owners, farmers and country businesses, working together for a more unified view of the future of access to the West Sussex countryside.

On a personal note, I am sorry that I shall not be a part of this continuing programme, but I have enjoyed the spirit and collaborative achievement of the members of the Forum and its sub-groups and I'm proud to have been a part of that. I must also thank the officers for manfully supporting this imposed 'alien' body and, working on a very limited budget, for improving the support given to the Forum, as well as encouraging its development in general.

I wish the venture every success.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ian Elliott". The signature is written in dark ink on a light background.

Ian Elliott, Chairman March 2002 – March 2005

What is a Local Access Forum?

West Sussex's landscape has everything – rolling hills, a dynamic coastline, mixed farmland and wildlife rich woodlands. Millions of people, both locals and visitors, use and enjoy this countryside which has been moulded over the years by generations of farmers, foresters and land managers.



People can access the West Sussex countryside in many ways; via the rights of way network, a variety of permissive arrangements and since September 2004 the new right of open access, which allows people to visit, on foot, designated areas of downland, heathland and registered common land.

Balancing the needs of people and land management is critical to ensure we retain the countryside we value while maximising the opportunities for people to explore and enjoy it.

The Countryside and Rights of Way ('CROW') Act 2000 gave a duty to all Access Authorities (county and unitary councils) to establish an independent Local Access Forum with a wide role in advising upon strategic access and recreation issues. This report details the second year of the Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex.

What is the Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex?

The Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex was established in 2003 by West Sussex County Council. It was originally called the West Sussex Local Access Forum. However members elected to change its name in 2004 to better reflect the nature of the work undertaken. The members of the Forum volunteer their time for free and were appointed for their range of experience and interests relating to countryside access. Currently the Forum has 18 members (a maximum of 22 is allowed), balanced between those who use the countryside for recreation, those who own and manage the land and those with other interests such as wildlife conservation, the landscape, heritage and working for the disabled. It met 4 times in 2004/2005, at a variety of venues across the county, to debate topical countryside access issues.



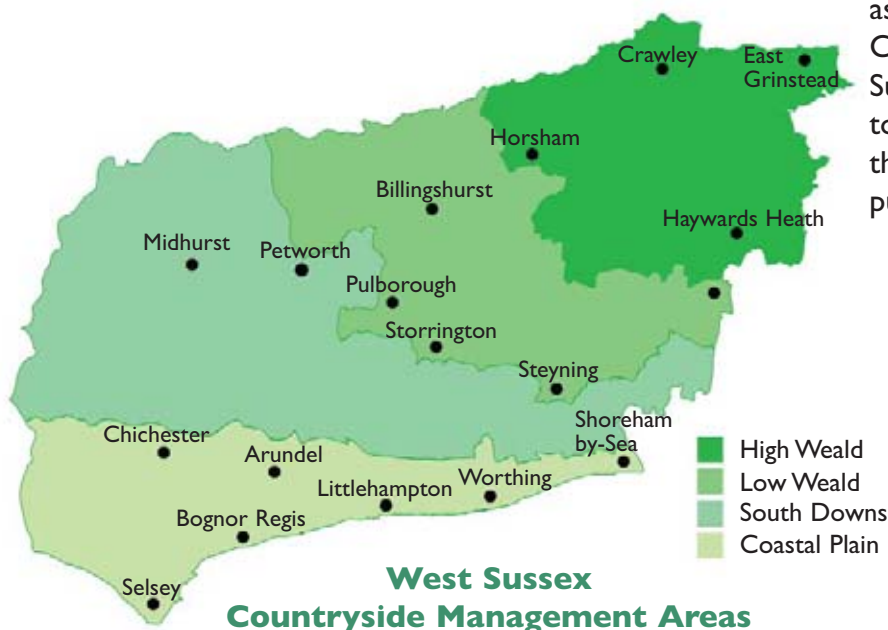
Advice was then fed to various bodies such as West Sussex County Council, Defra, the Countryside Agency and other relevant organisations and individuals. All meetings are open to the public.

Sub Fora and working groups to the Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex

Four Sub Fora have been set up to support the Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex by providing local knowledge and expertise and, in a similar way to the main Forum, are made up of members from a range of interests. They are based on the countryside management areas of the county - the Coastal Plain, the South Downs, the Low Weald and the High Weald.

The South Downs Access Forum is a joint Sub Forum formed with other access authorities (West Sussex, East Sussex and Hampshire County Councils and Brighton and Hove District Council) to advise on the whole of the South Downs.

All four Sub Fora have provided valuable information and ideas on local countryside access issues and have suggested projects to address these issues. These are passed via the mother Forum to the Rights of Way Improvement Plan working group which comprises members of the Forum and West Sussex County Council Officers. The Sub Fora have also provided useful information regarding open access land as well as other topics of local interest. The Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex would like to take this opportunity to thank all members of the Sub Fora for the hard work and enthusiasm they have put in throughout the year.



Some specific areas of work:

This year has been spent building on the work carried out last year, particularly regarding opening up access land and preparations for the Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

Open Access

In September 2004 West Sussex became one of the first areas in the country to introduce the new right of open access on foot. The public already had permissive access to some of the 5,500 hectares of land (around 3% of West Sussex) mapped as access land. However, some sites, including many of the smaller parcels, are being opened to the public for the first time. To date over £100,000 of work, including installing new gates, stiles and signposts, has been carried out, funded by West Sussex County Council (WSSCC) and the Countryside Agency. In addition to this work, new routes have been negotiated to enable the public to get to some sites where there was previously no means for the public to reach access land.

Open access - Actions of the Forum

- Advised WSSCC to co-ordinate efforts with neighbouring authorities to publicise and celebrate the new access rights. The resulting launch event was hosted by the Countryside Agency at Ditchling Beacon in West Sussex on 20th September 2004. Advice was given on the wording of a press release publicising the new right.
- Supported West Sussex County Council in negotiating access to 'island' sites. On the Forums advice WSSCC has asked the Ordnance Survey to show permissive agreement routes on their maps.
- Advised WSSCC on applying for Countryside Agency grants to implement open access work.
- Lobbied (unsuccessfully) the Countryside Agency for the establishment of a register to record 'excepted land' (land that has been mapped that the public do not have access to; for further details visit www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk).

Rights of Way Improvement Plan

The CROW Act placed a duty on all county councils to produce a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP). This strategic document will help identify priorities to ensure the Right of Way network is maintained to the highest possible standard and ensure any improvements benefit all users. WSSCC has begun preparing its RoWIP although publication of the final document is still some way off.

Rights of Way Improvement Plan - Actions of the Forum

- Agreed that the RoWIP should have four chapters, each representing one of the four countryside management areas.
- Commented on the proposals (issues and projects) identified by the Sub Fora for inclusion in the RoWIP and forwarded information to West Sussex County Council.
- Commented on the RoWIP questionnaire and assisted with its distribution to users and land managers.
- Instrumental in setting up the RoWIP Working Group in partnership with WSSCC, which has advised on the RoWIP process and prioritised issues and projects put forward by the Forum.



Contact with Parish Councils - Actions of the Forum

- Letter sent from the Forum to all Parish Councils to notify them of its work and to invite them to submit issues and projects to be considered for the RoWIP.
- Supported WSSCC hosting seminars during the winter to inform parish councils about open access and the RoWIP.

Influencing Local and National Policy - Actions of the Forum

- The Forum has responded to a number of Defra consultations and to WSSCC's stakeholder consultation on the draft Local Transport Plan.
- Seven Forum members met with the Rt Hon Alun Michael MP, Minister for Rural Affairs and Local Environmental Quality, at an event hosted by Brighton and Hove Local Access Forum, to debate the implementation of the CROW Act and how it relates to the role of Local Access Fora.

Outside Speakers have included Cath Hart presenting on Hampshire County Council's Countryside Access Plans and Nigel Hiscoke of Defra on permissive access provided via agri-environmental schemes.

Future Work

Work in 2005-2006 will continue to focus on assisting West Sussex County Council prepare its RoWIP and in ensuring open access land is available for the public to enjoy. Specific topics for meetings are likely to include access to water and access to the countryside in motorised vehicles.

Sub Fora to the Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex

Coastal Plain Sub Forum

During the year Peter Skilton sadly resigned as Chairman to be replaced by myself. Membership of the Sub Forum is very strong and brings much expert and detailed knowledge of the issues facing local people. Open access is a relatively minor issue in the Coastal Plain so efforts have concentrated on the RoWIP. The Sub Forum sees its priorities in themes, including the lack of long distance routes in and through the Coastal Plain; the deficit of bridleways south of the A27 trunk road and the erosion of coastal paths and projects proposed are aimed primarily at addressing these.

Peter Brown – Chairman

Low Weald Sub Forum

The Sub Forum has succeeded in identifying projects that address a variety of problems and much needed improvements to the rights of way network in the Low Weald to put forward for inclusion in the RoWIP. The majority of improvements fall within the themes of improving safety, linking communities with the countryside and provision of circular routes. The projects recommended should benefit many users, including walkers, riders, cyclists, the elderly, people with disabilities and carriage drivers.

Sion Evans – Chairman

High Weald Sub Forum

As with the other Sub Fora the main focus has been the identification of issues and projects to be recommended for inclusion in the RoWIP. Key issues identified include improving safety for all users, creating a cohesive network and addressing instances where a right of way has been severed by a busy road. Many projects were put forward, leaving the difficult task of short listing using the criteria set by the parent forum. Some parts of the High Weald require further investigation, something that will be carried out during the coming year.

Tricia Butcher - Chairman

South Downs Sub Forum

The South Downs Access Forum is a joint Sub Forum of four other Fora and aims to develop quality standards uniformly across the South Downs.

The main focus for 2004 has been to help the Highways Authorities prepare for the new rights on open access land. We have worked with landowners, the County Councils and the Sussex Downs Conservation Board to decide on what new infrastructure is needed. Advice has also been given to the four parent Fora regarding the issues in the South Downs to be included in their RoWIPs.

Issues covered this year have included motorised vehicles in the countryside, nature conservation & access and safe routes.

Glynn Jones – Chairman



Who sits on the Forum and what interests do they represent?

| Member | Interests |
|---|---|
| Bill Acraman | Rights of way / environment (County Council rep.) |
| Carla Barnes (replaced by David Ribbens in 2005) | Parish and Town Councils / landowner (D Ribbens – Parish and Town Councils / Scouting) |
| Helen Baldwin | Equestrian; riding / driving |
| Phil Belden | Countryside management |
| Roy Bidwell | Cycling |
| Peter Brown | Countryside management |
| Derek Deedman | Highways / environment (County Council rep.) |
| Ian Elliott; Chairman (resigned March 2005) | Conservation/recreation |
| Sion Evans | Equestrian; driving |
| Peter Fancourt (from March 2005) | Motorised vehicles |
| Ann Janes | Walking / rural issues (District Council rep.) |
| Glynn Jones | Countryside management |
| Trevor Passmore | Farming |
| Veronica Perrin; Chairman March 2005 | Equestrian; riding |
| Paul Quinton | Disability interests |
| Nigel Sloan | Walking |
| William Trinick; Vice-chair March 2005 | Land management |
| Nicky Webber (resigned 2004) | Walking / cycling / riding |
| Tony Whitbread (resigned 2005) | Conservation policy |
| Alan (Ted) White | Conservation/ walking |
| Shirley Wright | Landscape / countryside |

The Forum acknowledges the contribution of John Couzens, who represented motorised vehicle users, who sadly passed away during 2004.

To ensure we continue to have a balanced forum we invite anyone with an interest in forestry or conservation policy or a riparian landowner (preferably outside South Downs) to apply to sit on the Forum. If you are interested, would like to attend a meeting or want further information please contact:

Jane Noble
 Officer to the Forum
 West Sussex County Council
 The Grange, Tower Street
 Chichester
 West Sussex
 PO19 1RH
 01243 756863
jane.noble@westsussex.gov.uk
www.westsussex.gov.uk/countryside



If you would like a copy of this publication in another format (audio, Braille, large print, another language) please contact the Communications Officer, Environment and Development, West Sussex County Council, The Grange, Tower Street, Chichester, West Sussex PO19 1RH. Telephone 01243 777544. www.westsussex.gov.uk

Designed and produced by West Sussex County Council, Environment and Development, Design and Cartography.
 Printed by St Richards Press. Printed on 100% Recycled paper.
 Kieran Stigant, Director for Environment and Development. October 2005.