

Annual Report of the South Downs Access Forum 2004

The South Downs is one of the best loved landscapes in the country. It is enjoyed by millions of people – locals and tourists alike – every year. There are literally thousands of miles of footpaths and bridleways in the South Downs and people travel from miles around to enjoy the peace, tranquillity, stunning views and fresh air of the area. But the South Downs is also a “living landscape”. People live and work in the South Downs and promoting the access to the countryside without hindering the traditional working of the land which has made the landscape is a challenging balancing act. The South Downs Access Forum has been set up to provide advice on getting the balance right – this is the report of its first year.

What is the South Downs Access Forum?

In 2000, the Government passed a law requiring county and unitary councils to set up “Local Access Forums” to provide them with advice on access to the countryside. Because of the unique character of the South Downs, and the fact that they straddle the areas of four Councils – Hampshire, East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton and Hove – an additional Forum was set up to provide advice specific to the South Downs to the four statutory Forums.

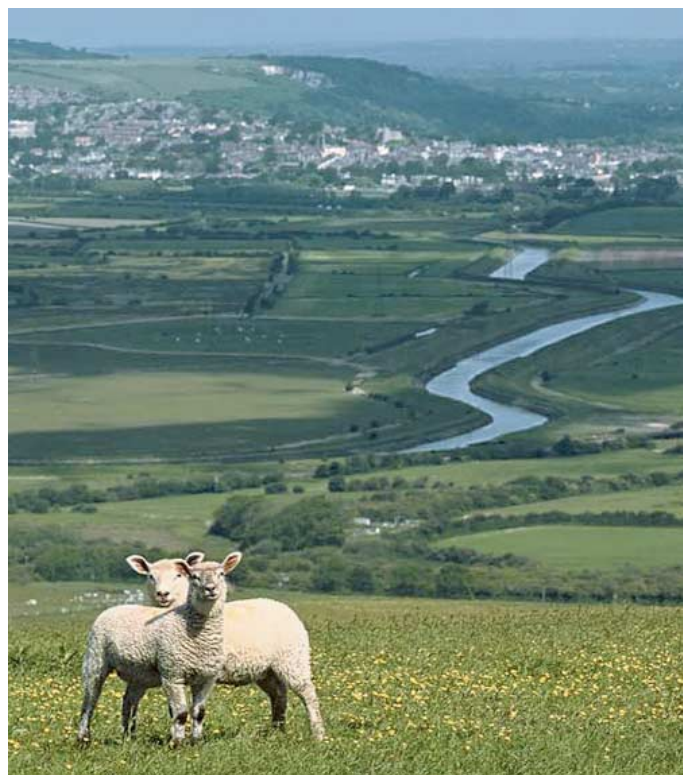


The South Downs Access Forum is a group of 20 individuals who live and work in and around the South Downs and who volunteer their time for free. Their experience and interests are wide ranging – walkers, horseriders, cyclists, farmers, land managers, conservationists and off-riders are all

represented. Their overall aim is to make the South Downs more accessible and enjoyable for all.

What does the Forum do?

The full Forum meets roughly five times a year, but smaller working groups meet more regularly to discuss specific local issues. Over the year, the local authorities, and countryside bodies that manage the South Downs, have approached the Forum for its opinion on specific problems. The mix of interests on the Forum means it is uniquely placed to offer impartial advice and come up with practical solutions which address the concerns of landowners and users alike. The Forum has also raised issues with the authorities itself and made them aware of opportunities to improve access to the countryside and avoid problems.

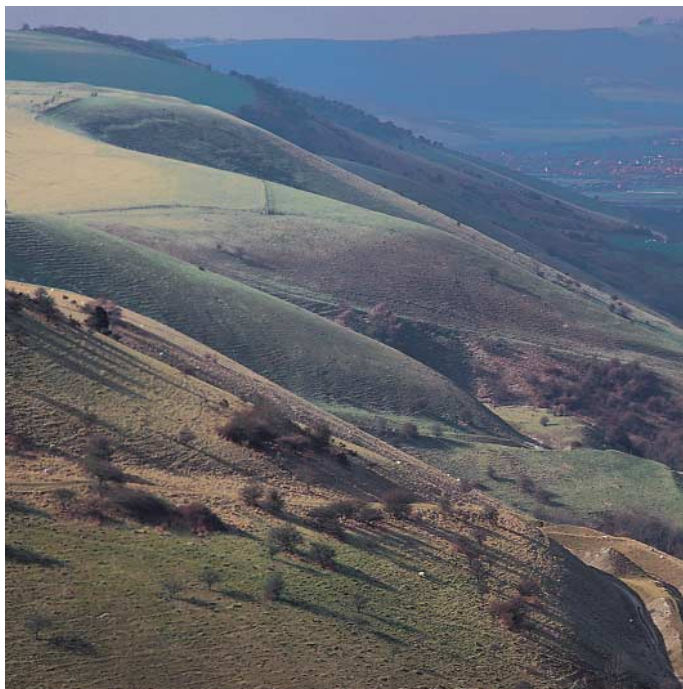


Some Specific Areas of Work

○ Open Access

In September, the Sussex Downs became one of the first areas in the country to introduce the new right of Open Access. This new right allows people to walk freely over designated areas of downland which have previously been off-limits to the public. There are around 200 parcels of open access land in the South Downs ranging from a few acres to hundreds of acres in size. Their locations are shown on the new Ordnance Survey Explorer maps.

Preparing for the new right has been a mammoth task. It will require the installation of hundreds of new gates, stiles and signposts and even the creation of new footpaths. The Forum has worked closely with landowners, the county councils and the Sussex Downs Conservation Board to decide exactly what new infrastructure is needed and where it should go. The Forum was also instrumental in persuading the Countryside Agency to pay for the infrastructure.



It is hoped that all areas of open access land will be open by the end of March 2005. New infrastructure has already been installed at some key sites including Millpond Bottom and West Harting Down in West Sussex and areas around Ditchling Beacon in East Sussex.

○ Improving the path network

The same legislation which set up the Local Access

Areas now designated as open access land are marked with this symbol. These new sites are open to walkers right across the South Downs. To find out where the open access land in your neighbourhood is, try the new Explorer maps or visit www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk

South Downs Access Forum Partners

Brighton and Hove City Council, Countryside Agency,
East Hampshire AONB, East Sussex County Council,
Hampshire County Council, Sussex Downs AONB,
West Sussex County Council

Forums, also requires the councils to draw up plans to improve the network of paths in their areas.

These "Rights of Way Improvement Plans", or RoWIPs for short, will feed into the local transport plans and are a great opportunity to make sure the network meets the needs of the many users who enjoy the South Downs every day.



The footpaths, bridleways and byways in the South Downs are among the heaviest used in the country – there are over 39 million visits to the South Downs each year. People use the rights of way network for walking, riding horses and motorbikes, cycling and driving. Managing and providing for this use across the thousands of miles of rights of way requires a lot of thought and planning. The RoWIPs last for ten years and their aim is to ensure that the needs of users are met. They will address issues such as safety, accessibility, whether paths are in the right place to meet need, and information and signage.

The Forum has set up working groups to provide input into each council's RoWIP and has provided advice on the issues to be addressed and proposed specific new routes and amendments to the network - it has developed nearly 200 proposals for improving the network for all users. The Forum will keep working on this topic for the next couple of years. The big milestones are in July 2005 when the local transport plans are published and in 2007 – the final deadline for the councils to complete their RoWIPs.

○ Speaking to Government

The Forum has also sent letters to the Rt. Hon Alun Michael MP – the Minister for Rural affairs – raising concerns about farmers' liabilities and other issues around the new right of Open Access and has responded to consultations from his department.



How can you find out more?

The Forum has a website where you can view all the agendas and minutes of the meetings and find out more about its work and members this can be viewed at www.vic.org.uk/access.htm. Or you can contact Keith Tyrell, the Forum Officer, by email at ktyrell@southdowns-aonb.gov.uk or by writing to him at The Sussex Downs Conservation Board, Victorian Barn, Ford Lane, Ford BN18 0EF.

