

West Sussex Local Access Forum

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5.11.23

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: High Weald AONB Management Plan Consultation

I am responding to the above consultation on behalf of West Sussex Local Access Forum (WSLAF).

West Sussex Local Access Forum (WSLAF) is an independent advisory body, established under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, to give access advice to local authorities, statutory organisations and non-government organisations. In giving that advice, the Forum's main objective is to ensure the existing network of public rights of way (prows), as well as the wider access network, is protected and where possible enhanced. The Forum has a balanced membership of knowledgeable and experienced users (walkers, cyclists, horse riders and carriage drivers), landowners and other interests (including conservation, disabled access, landscape). For further information about the Forum please visit www.wslaf.org.

High Weald Partnership 20-year vision (pg 7)

The Forum supports and welcomes the overall vision of the Draft Plan, especially the intentions within the document which concern access to the countryside. In particular these include the commitments to access a 'natural health service' and education in 'ecological literacy' and more opportunities for walking and cycling. We suggest amending the wording to include horse riding, and the need to work together to ensure fair access to the AONB.

We agree that the increasing urbanisation in the area of the AONB is having a significant impact in terms of traffic volumes (both vehicles and people), and the loss of green space. It is therefore important that active travel routes are maintained and enhanced, including for equestrians where appropriate, to ensure that access to the countryside for leisure recreation and health is available to as many people as possible.

We have made particular comments as follows:

Routeways (pg 26-29)

'Top Five Issues' (pg 28) – whilst Members agree with these top five issues, in Item 1, we suggest amending the wording to read 'Extinguishments and diversions of Public Rights of Way (PRoW).....' and adding ...'obstruction' of PRoWs. Both would be relevant to protecting ancient routeways.

We agree with Objective 1, particularly where a 'routeway' (ProW) passes through new development, where it can easily become urbanised or functional reducing the

benefit of use for leisure, recreation and health and well-being. Surfacing appropriate to its location and planting of border trees etc., would allow the path to be part of green infrastructure and can help to maintain the character of the route.

We also agree in principle with Objective2. However, verges have historically acted as refuges for vulnerable users, particularly walkers and equestrians where local roads have to be used to link routes in the wider access network. This should be taken into account when considering the treatment of verges.

'Ambitions for 2029' (pg 29) – The Forum is pleased to note the recognition of a need for both *functional* routes and improved public access to the countryside for *leisure* purposes. These uses are not always complementary but are of equal importance and both must be considered and catered for.

'Actions' (pg 29). -

- Item b - should also include extinguishments and the Partnership should review and potentially object to such applications
- Item k - the emphasis on *historical* routes may be at the expense of some *present day* issues. Upgrading may mean making adjustments to increase accessibility for particular groups of users (e.g. removal of stiles would help disabled with access).

Perceptual and Aesthetic Qualities (pg 42-45)

Key qualities (pg 43) - 2nd bullet point (Item c) – we suggest amending the wording as follows 'a sense of freedom..... suitable for walking, cycling and *horse riding*..... Equestrians should be included here, as they are on pg 44 in 'Top five issues, item 3 "lack of travel routes for pedestrians, cyclists and riders".

We agree with the 'Top five issues' and Objectives PQ1, PQ2 and PQ3

People and Access (pg 64-67))

- Pg 65 Para 4 – We consider that there is a danger in confusing 'sustainable travel options', where '*functional*' routes may require the installation of safety measures, such as lighting and hard surfacing, with 'public access to rural areas', '*leisure*' routes, which do not require such changes. These routes will require careful consideration to ensure that the rural character is retained.
- Principles 2029 (pg 67, 2nd bullet point)– In general we agree with the five priorities set out. However, the PRoW network is not extensive for all classes of user, particularly equestrians, and enhancement of the bridleway network, providing safety and enjoyment for all, would therefore be of great benefit.
- Pg 67 – we consider that the second bullet point could include the removal or replacement of stiles and to the fourth a further bullet point could be added for the promotion and support for the removal of barriers such as stiles; and the improvement of path surfaces where feasible to support access by the widest ranges of users as possible.

<p>This letter constitutes formal advice from the West Sussex Local Access Forum. The High Weald AONB is required, in accordance with section 94(5) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, to have regard to relevant advice from this Local Access Forum in carrying out its functions.</p>

The Forum looks forward to being updated on progress with the Management Plan. and to future involvement regarding NMU matters in the AONB.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jane Noble', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Jane Noble, Forum Officer
West Sussex Local Access Forum

Copy for information to: All WSLAF members