

South East Local Access Forum Meetings

There were two meetings (6th October & 3rd March) and a conference with a wider attendance in the afternoon of 3rd March.

An English Access Forum (EAF) is being established which will enable LAFs to get together to voice common concerns and provide a link with Natural England (NE).

The meeting on 6th October elected Mathew Balfour from Kent and Alan Marlow from Hampshire to represent the SE on the EAF and Cath Hart from Hampshire was asked to be the regional LAF co-ordinator. Kevin Haugh is the Natural England contact for LAFs in the South East.

It was proposed that there should be a sub-group of those LAFs which have Thames Basin Heaths in their areas.

Other items for discussion were the Marine Bill (which is to create increased access to English coastline) and Gating Orders (where back alleys are gated for security reasons, some of which are rights of way).

Other LAFs in our region seem to meet quarterly and are more involved in countryside matters, looking at strategic planning and discovering lost ways.

The meeting on 3rd March approved the terms of reference for itself (SELAF) and had a presentation from the Rural Director of the South of England Development Agency (SEEDA) they have now developed links with the EC and do not need to go through DEFRA.

It was reported that there seems to be a problem with Natural England's office in Guildford not consulting LAFs about Thames Basin Heaths so again there is a move to set up a sub-group of those LAFs concerned.

We have long distance footpaths and cycle routes, SEEDA are therefore suggesting that we have long distance horse trails too.

In the afternoon I attended sessions on "Influencing countryside provision for new housing" and "Can shared use routes be successful". In the first of these we were reminded that planners are obliged to consult LAFs and LAFs should use all the experience of their members to bring pressure for adequate countryside access provision to feature in any plans. We are lucky that because of the proximity of protected heathland, any development has to include provision such that it does not increase the pressure on that heathland. Even with European protection for the heathland some large chunks of the MOD land are being put forward for housing. There are plans for a so called "eco town" to be built on the site of an aerodrome at Dunsfold south of Guildford. In the shared use session, when it became clear that shared use was converting footpaths into footpath and cycleways, it had the equestrians jumping up and down. They complained that in places grass verges suitable for horses had been tarmaced over to make cycleways. It was reported that the perceived increase in risk to users by shared use was not born out in practise. However marking the route to segregate users does increase conflict as it gives a concept of territory whereas in practise all users use the full width. What is needed is tolerance by all users.

Richard Mosses.