

**SLAF**  
**Suffolk Local Access Forum**

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I am writing in my capacity of Vice Chairman of the Suffolk Local Access Forum, as you are aware Local Access Forums were constituted as part of the 2001 Wildlife and Countryside Act and act as a statutory consultee on matters of access with a wider responsibility for public enjoyment of the countryside.

The Agriculture Bill is now working its way through parliament and we are asking that you as a local MP support the wider provision of access during the passage of the legislation.

The Government's consultation in February of this year gave little practical detail, the bill does not identify particular aspects and we are asking that you might make input in a number of ways.

The early Countryside Stewardship Schemes made funds available to farmers and landowners to provide permissive access. My own farm was involved in providing access under a Higher Level Stewardship Scheme from 2007 to 2017. The most recent Countryside Stewardship Scheme does not permit permissive access due to EU rules not permitting such payments.

I led a delegation in March 2011 with MPs Dr Dan Poulter and David Ruffley to meet Richard Benyon who was at the time DEFRA Minister of State, we raised concerns about the loss of permissive access and were told at the time that access is not supported by EU funding and for that reason they were removed from later stewardship schemes. The minister was able to inform us at that meeting he was able to bring back educational access under future schemes.

As the UK leaves the EU we have a golden opportunity to create an Agricultural Support system that delivers wider public benefits and meet the wider needs of the country. Michael Gove has stated a central theme is public money for public goods.

Clearly public enjoyment of the countryside alongside food production is an important public good. I am sure you appreciate the health and well-being of exercise and greater provision for people to enjoy the countryside.

Permissive access has worked well but there should be the opportunity to provide permanent routes under any new law.

Particular emphasis should be placed on improving access around places of high population and linking existing routes and providing circular ones.

There is no doubt that the existing rights of way network can be very variable, some parishes are well provided and others have very limited paths.

The provision within the network for horse riders in many areas is poor and this raises serious safety issues. Under our own Higher Level Stewardship Scheme we were able to provide a superb network off road for horse riders linking with our neighbours but the scheme came to an end in 2017.

Better public access clearly brings with it responsibilities in particular for owners to control their dogs and people to keep to the available routes, however I believe it is possible to deliver a partnership between landowners and government for people to both enjoy and appreciate the wider countryside and this bill can deliver that.