



OUTER HEBRIDES OUTDOOR ACCESS STRATEGY

(REVISION MAY 2006)

INTRODUCTION

The Outer Hebrides Outdoor Access Strategy has been developed in partnership with the Western Isles Countryside Access Forum which represents many local organisations and groups, and was informed by the outcome of public consultation meetings held throughout the area. It aims to provide a clear framework for the implementation of the access requirements set out in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 and also to complement other initiatives such as improving health, reducing car usage and connecting communities. This strategy is also informed by surveys and consultations carried out by the Western Isles Countryside Access Programme and meetings of the Western Isles Countryside Access Forum.

Since the preparation of a draft strategy the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 has been implemented and the need for a Core Path Network Plan has been brought into focus. The Comhairle has until February 2008 to identify a Core Path network in the Western Isles and to prepare a draft Core Path Network Plan. As a precursor to the preparation of the plan this Outdoor Access Strategy is being adopted.

AIMS OF THIS STRATEGY

- To provide an access audit, identifying supply and demand, a policy audit and identifying the resources available.
- To identify the key issues relating to outdoor access in the Outer Hebrides.
- To develop a vision for outdoor access in the Outer Hebrides, based on the previous draft of the Outdoor Access Strategy, the findings of subsequent surveys (for the Western Isles Countryside Access Programme) and the result of the access audit.
- To develop an action plan based on the above.

STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

This strategy has been developed by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's Countryside Access Manager, in consultation with the Western Isles Countryside Access Forum. Its development has been informed by consultations with the general public at a series of community appraisals held in the spring of 2003, and by subsequent consultations carried out with community groups, landowners, and individuals as part of the Western Isles Countryside Access Programme in 2004/5.

CORE PATHS

The development of a Core Path Network is a key component of the strategy. The draft guidance document to the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 states that “Every local authority in Scotland is required under Section 17 (1) of the Act to draw up a plan for a system of paths (core paths) sufficient for the purposes of giving the public reasonable access throughout their area”. The guidance further states that while recognising that access rights will not be restricted to core paths, a system of core paths throughout Scotland is an essential element in the arrangements for access. “Accordingly local authorities should give priority to their development in pursuance of their duty under section 17 (1) of the Act.”

It is clear therefore that the Comhairle has a responsibility under the Act to prepare a Core Paths Plan and to establish the system of paths throughout the Western Isles.

Core Paths are to be promoted and kept free from obstructions by the Local Authority, and will meet certain standards which are appropriate for its intended use. The Local Authority may in addition choose to ensure that adequate maintenance is carried out on Core Paths. The process of preparing the draft Core Path Plan is preceded by consultations with community groups and other interested parties.

Access has potential benefits for both local residents and visitors in terms of promoting access for health; encouraging responsible access to historical, archaeological and natural heritage sites; and economic benefits in terms of the advantages to sustainable tourism development.

ACCESS PROVISION SUPPLY AUDIT

Open access has been more or less taken for granted in the Outer Hebrides for many years, so it would appear that the Land Reform Act (Scotland) 2003 does not change a great deal. However, the formalising of access rights enshrined in the Act does help to provide a basis for resolving conflict in those few areas where it exists. Also a Core Path Network will enable visitors who come from areas where there has not been a tradition of open access to know routes they can access without fear of hindrance (even though these fears will be for the most part unfounded), and to easily navigate these routes by means of signage.

Because of the tradition of open access there is no existing path ‘network’ as such, though there are routes that have been traditionally use for access, such as machair tracks, peat roads, seaweed tracks and so on, and a few dedicated and promoted walking routes. What this means in practice is that there is enormous potential for the creation of routes, and prioritising the sheer number of potential routes into a coherent network will present a challenge.

However the Core Path Network is just that – it provides a basic framework of routes sufficient for the purpose of “giving the public reasonable access throughout their area”. These routes will link into, and support, wider networks of other paths. So it is important to note that no paths will be ‘lost’ by not being included in a Core Path Network Plan.

The Western Isles Countryside Access Programme, which commenced in April 2004, identified a large number of potential routes (approximately 570 km). In doing so the project also carried out consultations with Community Groups and other interested parties. The intention is therefore to use the findings of the WICAP project along with the outcomes of earlier Community Consultations meetings, as a basis for preparing a first draft of the Core Paths Plan, and to then carry out a public consultation exercise to air the findings and to seek consensus. After this a second draft will be prepared based on the outcomes of the public consultations.

As a result of an earlier project by the Comhairle, Scottish Natural Heritage and Western Isles Enterprise twenty Coastal Access Sites were established throughout the Outer

Hebrides. These represent an important part of the access provision as they provide access to some of the finest beaches in the Isles, along with car parking provision.

A long distance 'Outer Hebrides Way' has been an aspiration of the Comhairle and other interested parties for some time, and is included in the current Western Isles Structure Plan and Tourism Strategy. Though this has not come to fruition to date, it may well be that the Core Paths Network Plan identifies at least a skeleton of a long distance route, which can be developed at a later date.

In Stornoway, Lews Castle Grounds are unique in the Outer Hebrides in that they provide access to a 'parkland' environment in which trees are a significant feature. The grounds are an important resource particularly for those living in and around the Stornoway area, and are managed by the Stornoway Trust as well as being formally designated as a Designed Landscape.

The network of lochs which are a characteristic of the Western Isles provide virtually unlimited access to kayakers, windsurfers etc. and are an important aspect of access provision in the Isles.

Quality of access signage provision is an aspect which is, in part, being addressed by the Western Isles Countryside Access Programme, and will continue to be addressed as the Core Path Network develops. Existing access signage in the Outer Hebrides has been installed over a number of years by various bodies and is variable in quality.

Likewise the condition of countryside furniture such as gates and stiles on key access routes is, in part, being addressed by WICAP. Like signage, the quality of countryside furniture is variable.

Many of the areas which are accessed by tourists and visitors are covered by one and sometimes several conservation designations. Whilst this has so far not been an issue in the Outer Hebrides, as numbers increase the need to manage access to the more sensitive sites becomes of greater importance.

The rich archaeology of the Outer Hebrides has the potential to attract visitor numbers. However historic and archaeological monuments are again potentially subject to damage if numbers increase.

The main concerns of crofters whose land is often used for access are:

- Damage to fences, crops (rarely) and other property
- Worrying of livestock by dogs
- Liability issues relating to path surfaces and infrastructure
- Liability issues following injuries from interaction with stock

All of the above happen rarely and are not currently a cause for concern, but there is some apprehension among crofters that they may increase as the use of land for access becomes more popular, and particularly as routes are advertised more widely in books, magazines and web sites.

There is currently no comprehensive Countryside Ranger Service in the Outer Hebrides. Rangers can enable greater promotion of access routes, assist with conflict resolution and also monitoring and maintenance of paths (as well as carrying out guided walks programs and educational activities). A Ranger Service has been identified as an aspiration but currently resources are not available to enable the establishment of a sustainable service.

The growing community land ownership sector is giving a high priority to improving and encouraging access.

ACCESS PROVISION – DEMAND AUDIT

Tourism figures for the Western Isles suggest that walking and other forms of outdoor access are the most popular activity with visitors to the isles:

“More than half the visitors took part in one or more sporting activity, most commonly low level walking and rambling of under 8 miles (51%), or hill walking or low level walking of more than 8 miles (20%)” (*Western Isles Visitor Survey*, MacPherson Research, 1999)

An update to the Macpherson report prepared in 2002 suggests that there is a steady growth in tourism of around 3%. If the proportion of these undertaking outdoor (and particularly walking) activities remains the same, then clearly the demand for access provision will also be increasing.

Other circumstantial evidence suggests that demand is on the increase. For example a number of books have been written in recent years which promote walks of various levels in the Western Isles, and walks leaflets have been produced and promoted by the Tourist Board (now VisitScotland Outer Hebrides). Visible signs of tracks are starting to appear in more popular locations.

The introduction of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 and increasing recognition by the Comhairle that countryside access is an important aspect of visitor and local provision is also significant.

There is a growing demand from local communities for improved paths as evidenced by the positive response to a number of funding initiatives.

ACCESS PROVISION – POLICY AUDIT

The key policies which have a bearing on this document are:

Legislation

- Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003

National Agency Policies

- Scottish Natural Heritage (National Nature Reserve Management Plans, SSSI citations etc.)
- Historic Scotland (Historic Building Consents etc.)
- NHS Health Scotland. Health Promotion Policies

Local Authority Statutory Plans

- Structure Plan
- Local Plan

POLICY DOCUMENTS

The following documents were consulted during the formulation of this strategy:

Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003
Western Isles Structure Plan
Finalised Western Isles Local Plan
Western Isles Local Transport Strategy
Western Isles Tourist board strategies
Western Isles Health Board strategies

Highlands and Islands Access Strategy

"BT Countryside for All" A Good Practice Guide to Disabled People's Access in the Countryside"

RESOURCE AUDIT

This section identifies sources of funding that will be a critical element in the continued development of access provision in the Western Isles.

Potential Funding Sources

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
Western Isles Enterprise
Scottish Natural Heritage
Western Isles Health Board
VisitScotland Outer Hebrides
European Structural Funds
Rural Development Programme for Scotland

Partnership Opportunities

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
Western Isles Enterprise
Scottish Natural Heritage
Western Isles Health Board
Paths For All Partnership
Sustrans
VisitScotland Outer Hebrides

AUDIT SUMMARY

An analysis of the audit details in the form of a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis.

Strengths

- Existing relaxed attitude with regard to access amongst crofters and other land managers
- Community landowners are keen to improve access opportunities
- Existing network of informal paths
- WICAP capital programme is enabling upgrading of key access routes
- Supportive policy environment

Weaknesses

- Lack of clearly identified ongoing revenue funding for maintenance
- Lack of a Ranger Service to promote, monitor and manage the path network
- Lack of general information and poor signposting of routes

Opportunities

- Foster social inclusion and participation within communities
- Develop existing partnership working between agencies and local communities
- Enhance the health and wellbeing of communities
- Bring together partnership organisations and their resources (e.g. Scottish Natural Heritage could part fund a Ranger Service)
- Upgrade and link existing routes
- Promote economic benefits – tourism and new related business ventures
- Massive potential for expansion of the paths network

Threats

- Lack of available resources from funding organisations
- Lack of community involvement
- Apathy

VISION

This access strategy identifies the key issues relating to outdoor access in the Outer Hebrides. Its aim is to enable outdoor access for people of all ages and abilities, whether they are local or visitors to the Isles. The strategy aims to create a framework to deliver a wide range of benefits, such as improvement to access routes, integration with public transport systems, health and wellbeing, social inclusion and economic benefits through tourism. Following the model established by the Countryside Access Code it encourages responsible and sustainable attitudes to access both by those who partake in the activity and by land managers.

OBJECTIVES

Objective 1: Prepare a Core Paths Plan

- Review membership of Western Isles Countryside Access Forum
- Define standards for the Core path Network
- Collate a list of paths using data already collected during consultations
- Prepare a first draft Core Path Network Plan
- Circulate the draft Plan widely (including Internet)
- Carry out public consultations to verify the selected paths
- Resolve potential conflicts arising from the plan
- Prepare a final draft plan
- Carry out formal consultations to verify the Plan
- Finalise and publish the Core Paths Plan

Objective 2: Improve access to Core Path Network

- Survey the Network to identify issues
- Ensure core paths and other promoted routes meet appropriate standards.
- Ensure signposting, waymarking and interpretation is to an appropriate standard and appropriate for setting in consultation with the local community
- Identify paths suitable for upgrading to all abilities access
- Investigate public transport links and existing facilities for cyclists and horse riders
- Identify areas where car parking may be needed and provide where appropriate

Objective 3: Develop new paths to link existing paths or meet special needs

- Encourage the establishment of local walks around settlements
- Improve access to the shore in coastal communities
- Improve links between path networks
- Identify one or more long distance routes
- Explore opportunities to create new pathways in tandem with other developments

Objective 4: Develop long-term management plans for paths

- Develop long-term management plans for path networks, to identify management and maintenance needs for future resource planning (using the Countryside Access Management System).
- Define roles and responsibilities of partners.

Objective 5: Maximise economic potential through development of access in the Western Isles

- Prepare funding bids that support training and employment in construction, path management and outdoor related businesses
- Establish an Outer Hebrides ranger service

- Promote the Outer Hebrides as a walking destination for tourists and create links with existing initiatives

Objective 6: Develop access for specialist activities where appropriate

- Develop cycle tracks where appropriate
- Develop horse riding tracks where appropriate
- Develop access to popular recreational waters

Objective 7: Encourage responsible access to sites of natural or archaeological interest

- Encourage responsible access to popular historical and archaeological sites
- Encourage responsible access to sensitive natural heritage sites

Objective 8: Promote access to provide health benefits

- Develop links with other agencies to promote health benefits of walking and other forms of countryside access

Objective 9: Evaluate and monitor outputs of strategy on an ongoing basis

- Carry out a review exercise on the strategy in three years

Action Mechanism

The strategy will be implemented in partnership with those represented by the Western Isles Countryside Access Forum whose members include the funding agencies as well as representatives of land managers, user groups and other interested parties.

Action Areas

For the purposes of any strategic planning the Outer Hebrides is subdivided into strategic action zones, which are based on the Sustainable Community Areas identified by the Comhairle:

Access Action Areas

Barra and Vatersay
South Uist and Eriskay
Benbecula
North Uist and Berneray
Harris and Scalpay
Uig and Great Bernera
West Side and Carloway
Ness
North Lochs
South lochs
Broadbay
Point
Greater Stornoway
Offshore Islands

APPENDIX 1: STRATEGY PLAN OBJECTIVES

Indicative timescale: Year 1 to Year 3

Indicative priority: High Medium or Low

Objective 1: To Identify and establish a Core Path Network (see also Appendix 3 for Core Paths Planning timetable)

	Action	Indicative timescale	Indicative priority	Responsibility
1.2	Review membership of Western Isles Countryside Access Forum and adjust as necessary	1	H	WICAF
1.0	Define standards for the Core Path Network	1	H	CnES, WICAF
1.1	Collate a list of paths using data already collected during consultations	1	H	WICAF CnES
1.3	Prepare a first draft of the Core Path Network Plan	1	H	CnES
1.4	Circulate the draft plan widely (including Internet)	2	H	CnES
1.5	Carry out public consultations to verify the selected paths	2	H	CnES WICAF
1.6	Resolve conflicts arising from the plan	2	H	CnES
1.6	Prepare a final draft plan	2	H	CnES
1.6	Carry out formal consultations to verify the plan	2	H	CnES WICAF
1.7	Finalise and publish the plan	2	H	CnES

Objective 2: Improvements to the Core Path Network

	Action	Indicative timescale	Indicative priority	Responsibility
2.0	Survey the Network to identify issues	2	H	CnES
2.1	Ensure Core Paths and other promoted routes meet appropriate safety standards	2	H	CnES, WICAF, local organisations
2.2	Ensure signposting, waymarking and interpretation to an appropriate standard and appropriate for setting in consultation with the local community	2	H	CnES WICAF
2.3	Identify and upgrade paths suitable for all abilities access	1	H	CnES WICAF Access Panels
2.4	Investigate public transport links and existing facilities for cyclists and horse riders	2	M	CnES, VisitScotland, local organisations
2.5	Identify areas where car parking may be needed and provide where appropriate	2	M	CnES WICAF

Objective 3: Develop new paths to link existing paths or to meet special needs

	Action	Indicative timescale	Indicative priority	Responsibility
3.1	Encourage the establishment of local walks around settlements	1-3	H	CnES, WICAF WIHB, VisitScotland
3.2	Improve access to the shore in coastal communities	1-3	M	CnES WICAF
3.3	Improve links between path networks	3	M	CnES WICAF
3.4	Identify one or more long distance routes	3	M	CnES, WICAF, SNH VisitScotland
3.5	Explore opportunities to create new pathways in tandem with other developments	3	M	CnES

Objective 4: Develop long-term management plans for paths

	Action	Indicative timescale	Indicative priority	Responsibility
4.1	Develop long-term management plans for path networks, to identify management and maintenance needs for future resource planning (using the Countryside Access Management System)	3	M	CnES WICAF
4.2	Define roles and responsibilities of partners	1	H	CnES WICAF

Objective 5: Maximise economic potential through development of access in the Western Isles

	Action	Indicative timescale	Indicative priority	Responsibility
5.1	Prepare funding bids that support training and employment in construction, path management and outdoor related businesses.	1-3	H	CnES WICAF
5.2	Establish an Outer Hebrides ranger service	1-3	H	CnES, SNH
5.3	Promote the Outer Hebrides as an outdoor destination for tourists, create links with existing initiatives	1-3	H	CnES VisitScotland WIE SNH

Objective 6: Develop access for specialist activities where appropriate

	Action	Indicative timescale	Indicative priority	Responsibility
6.1	Develop cycle tracks where appropriate	2-3	M	CnES WICAF OF
6.2	Develop horse riding tracks where appropriate	2-3	M	CnES WICAF OF
6.3	Develop access to popular recreational waters	1-3	M	CnES WICAF OF

Objective 7: Encourage responsible access to sites of natural or archaeological interest

	Action	Indicative timescale	Indicative priority	Responsibility
7.1	Encourage responsible access to popular historical and archaeological sites	1-3	M	CnES VisitScotland Historic Scotland
7.2	Encourage responsible access to sensitive natural heritage sites	1-3	M	CnES SNH

Objective 8: Promote access to provide health benefits

	Action	Indicative timescale	Indicative priority	Responsibility
8.1	Develop links with other agencies to promote health benefits of walking and other forms of countryside access	1-3	M	CnES WICAF VisitScotland

Objective 9: Evaluate and monitor outputs of strategy on an ongoing basis

	Action	Indicative timescale	Indicative priority	Responsibility
9.1	Carry out a review exercise of the strategy in three years	3	H	CnES WICAF