



CONSULTATION

The Key Issues for the Development of a New 10 Year Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for Northern Ireland

ISSUE DATE: 2nd December 2011

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This document has been developed by a steering group comprised of the following organisations:

- 1. Sport Northern Ireland*
- 2. Department of the Environment*
- 3. Department of Culture Arts and Leisure Inland Waterways*
- 4. Northern Ireland Tourist Board*
- 5. Countryside Access and Activities Network*
- 6. Chief Leisure Officers Association (Local Authorities)*
- 7. Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association*
- 8. Forest Service Northern Ireland*

1 Introduction

For the purposes of this plan, “Outdoor Recreation” is defined as non motorized sporting and recreational activities that take place in the natural environment and that generally do not require a dedicated pitch or building.

- 1.1 Northern Ireland has a wide variety of landscapes and scenery within a very small geographical area as well as a dramatic and beautiful coastline. Mountains and moorlands, winding river valleys, green rolling countryside, extensive inland waterways, woodlands and forests all make up the Northern Ireland countryside and are a fantastic resource that has tremendous potential to attract visitors and to promote enjoyment, health and well being for our local communities.
- 1.2 Towns and cities in Northern Ireland tend to be small and are bounded by fantastic scenery with a number of urban, country and forest parks close to them.
- 1.3 A new 10 year Action Plan to continue to realise the potential within Northern Ireland for outdoor recreation is being developed by a steering group comprised of a range of government and non-government organisations and demonstrates a strong commitment to and realisation of the value of outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland.
- 1.4 This document provides a summary of the issues and challenges that have been identified as needing to be overcome to realise the potential of Northern Ireland to be a place where outdoor recreation can be enjoyed by all, deliver healthy lifestyles and is a key economic driver through activity tourism.
- 1.5 The purpose of this consultation is to help the steering group to gain the views of stakeholders with an interest in outdoor recreation, to confirm whether these are the issues and to decide what actions and activities are required to overcome the issues and challenges highlighted.
- 1.6 You are invited to provide feedback through the questions included in this document, or by the on-line survey or through the public consultation meetings.

1.7 The Action Plan will be developed using the feedback from the consultation and should be completed in 2012.



2 Background

2.1. Northern Ireland's first Countryside Recreation Strategy was developed by the Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of Environment (now NIEA) and the Sports Council of Northern Ireland (now SNI) in 1998.

2.2. The vision of the strategy was to: *"To develop and sustain a vibrant countryside recreation culture in which responsible and well informed people enjoy high quality, sustainable and appropriate activities in an accessible, well managed yet challenging environment; where landowners and managers are welcoming and there are accompanying benefits to local communities both in social and economic terms."*

There were 3 principles underpinning this vision:

- Mutual respect between all interested parties
- Sustainable access
- Quality of the experience

2.3. One of the main outcomes from the strategy was the creation of a network of key stakeholders i.e. the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN) and a company limited by guarantee to co-ordinate and help to deliver the products and the infrastructure required for the implementation of the strategy. The success of CAAN in doing this is well noted and the prominence of outdoor recreation has significantly increased in the past 12 years as has been evidenced by the research into Trends in Outdoor Recreation¹ and Walking, Cycling and Horse Riding² in 2008 and 2010 respectively.

2.4. Since 1998 there have been significant political and societal changes within countryside and outdoor recreation and following a review of the existing Countryside Recreation Strategy in 2009, it was recognised that there was need to develop a new strategy or action plan. Following discussions between government departments it was agreed that the Action Plan would be developed under the auspices of Sport Matters, the Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-19.

2.5. The rationale for this is that Sport Matters has been adopted by the NI

Executive and is a cross departmental strategy with the necessary governance and monitoring arrangements already established. Sport Matters identifies 26 high level targets and sets the key strategic priorities for sport and physical recreation over the next ten years. The high level targets are structured to reflect the current and anticipated needs of sport and physical recreation in relation to:

- Participation
- Performance
- Places

This Action Plan will focus on participation – particularly for under-represented groups and places for outdoor recreation.

A copy of Sport Matters can be downloaded from www.sportni.net/about/SportMatters



1. *Trends in Outdoor Recreation 1995 – 2008*
2. *Trends in Walking, Cycling and Horse Riding 1995 – 2010*
www.countrysiderecreation.com/publications/research-reports/

3 Our Great Outdoors

- 3.1. A love for the natural environment, special landscapes, secret places, fantastic coastlines and the wildlife that inhabits them, is a strong part of the fabric and culture of our life in Northern Ireland. The value of green places to go to for recreation, relaxation and enjoyment is well documented and researched. However, irresponsible and unsustainable outdoor recreation can have an adverse impact on the natural environment and the livelihood of land owners and it is therefore necessary for government, landowners, the recreation industry and voluntary organisations to work together to ensure that there are opportunities to grow this interest and love for the outdoors in a sustainable manner.
- 3.2 Outdoor Recreation brings a range of significant benefits to society, communities and to individuals. These benefits include:
- 3.3 **Health, well being, enjoyment and social inclusion for all.**
 - a. Research completed by the Countryside Recreation Network in 2005 has highlighted a very strong connection between health and green spaces.³
 - b. CAAN research in 2008 and 2010 into trends in outdoor sports and walking, cycling and horse riding respectively has shown that there has been a significant growth in outdoor recreation activities – especially those that are done independently i.e. not through an organised club or body.
 - c. The outdoors can be enjoyed at minimal cost and are accessible within a short travel time for everyone in Northern Ireland. Outdoor recreation activities have been used to develop greater levels of social inclusion and community involvement.
- 3.4 **Economic growth.**
 - a. There has been a significant growth in the adventure and activity tourism sector – with only a handful of commercial providers in 1998 and now well in excess of 100 providers operating across

Northern Ireland.

- b. There has been a significant growth in the number of retailers and outlet stores selling outdoor equipment.
- c. There is growing recognition in other parts of the UK and Europe of the impact that Outdoor Recreation can bring with studies done in Wales and Scotland into the wider economic value of the sector for not only activity providers but also accommodation providers, cafés, restaurants, pubs and bars.

3.5 **Education – about the environment, self and others.**

- a. There is a long history of the Education and Library Boards providing high quality educational courses for schools and youth groups through the outdoors.
- b. There has been a significant growth in the number of pupils opting to do outdoor activities as part of the GCSE Physical Education curriculum.
- c. The use of the outdoors for team development is well documented and this was a significant growth area until the recession.

3.6 **Landscape, habitat and species protection and engendering support for biodiversity.**

- a. Spectacular landscapes, seascapes and habitats are crucial as both a tourism product and as a draw for local people to enjoy the outdoors.
- b. Outdoor enthusiasts feel a strong connection with wild landscapes and coastlines and it is in the interests of both the users and the activity providers to work in partnership with landowners and nature conservation bodies to ensure that these areas are protected and their special qualities maintained.
- c. The development and value of volunteering is a strong feature of the work undertaken by organisations such as the National Trust, CAAN and Mourne Heritage Trust.

3. *A countryside for health and wellbeing – the physical and mental health benefits of green exercise (Countryside Recreation Network)*
ISBN 1 84387 137 8

4. Developing the Action Plan

4.1 A steering group comprised of a range of organisations and both local and central government was established to develop the Action Plan. Early in the discussions it was agreed that overall aims and objectives must be backed up by clear targets and actions to be undertaken.

VISION

4.2 The draft vision for a new Outdoor Recreation Action Plan is:

"To continue to develop, manage and promote a dynamic culture of sustainable outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland."

4.3 *The aims from this vision are that Northern Ireland will be a place where:*

- *People enjoy the outdoors and show a high degree of responsibility for themselves, towards others and the environment they are using.*
- *There are increasing opportunities and improved access and infrastructure development for sustained and increased participation for the local population and visitors in outdoor recreation.*
- *There are accompanying benefits to both urban and rural communities in terms of health, social inclusion and economic development.*
- *People have ownership and understanding of the environment that they are using and play their part in maintaining, supporting and enhancing that environment.*

4.4 In addition to the delivery of Sport Matters this Action Plan will also support the delivery of the Northern Ireland Programme for Government key priorities and support departmental plans and priorities including:

- The Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland (Draft)
- A Fitter Future for All – an Obesity Prevention Framework for Northern Ireland
- NIEA strategies
- The Regional Development Strategy
- The NI Sustainable Development Strategy
- The Draft Rural White Paper for Northern Ireland
- The developing Volunteering Strategy

- The NI Play and Leisure Strategy
- The Recreational and Social Use of Forests Strategy

Question 1

Do you believe that the vision and aims capture the expressed wish to further develop outdoor recreation opportunities in Northern Ireland?



5. The Key Themes and Consultation Process

5.1 SNI in partnership with NIEA, DCAL Inland Waterways and the NI Tourist Board commissioned a series of nine issues papers to identify the primary issues that impact on outdoor recreation under the following topics:

- Healthy lifestyles
- Widening participation
- Environmental awareness, engagement and sustainability (supporting conservation through outdoor recreation) incorporating education
- Governance and partnership working (integrated outdoor recreation management) incorporating access
- Promotion and raising awareness
- Volunteering and community engagement / participation
- Activity tourism and entrepreneurship (rural and economic development)
- Facilities
- Monitoring and evaluation

These issues papers are available online at www.outdoorrecreationni.com.

5.2 The papers provide background information and flag up over 180 issues that could be addressed to support the further development of outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland.

5.3 A number of key and recurring themes emerged as a result of initial consultation and research:

- 1. Legislation, policy and responsibilities.**
- 2. Partnerships and structures for developing, managing and advocating outdoor recreation.**
- 3. Investment; whether that is time, energy or resources.**
- 4. Communication, marketing and promotion.**
- 5. The provision of appropriate access and facilities to ensure that current and future participation is sustainable.**
- 6. Research, monitoring and evaluation to provide for evidence based development and management.**

- 5.4 The steering group has developed a process for consultation on the key themes and issues to ensure that they are appropriate for developing outdoor recreation from the perspective of land owners, users, statutory authorities, governing bodies and activity providers.
- 5.5 The consultation will take a number of forms:
- Web based survey for individuals and / or organisations.
 - Meetings with focus groups such as countryside officers, activity providers and governing bodies.
 - Regional (6-7) open meetings for interested parties to hear first hand about the action plan and feed in their views.
- 5.6 Once the feedback from the consultation has been received, the Action Plan will be drawn up. This Plan will be subject to a further consultation process.
- 5.7 **This Action Plan will therefore be developed to attempt to address the barriers, issues and problems that would hinder the realisation of the vision.**



6. The main issues within the themes

6.1 Each of the key themes has been broken into a number of issues that capture the information provided within the nine issues papers.

6.2 Legislation, policy and responsibilities.

The difference in access legislation across the UK was highlighted in the early feedback from stakeholders and a number of times in the issues papers. The issues of responsibilities and policy development regarding outdoor recreation were highlighted across a number of the issues papers. The following key issues are considered to be fundamental to achieving the vision to continue to build a dynamic culture of sustainable outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland:

6.2.1 A lack of access and suitable facilities is deemed to be a significant constraint and an issue to be addressed in widening participation. There is therefore a perceived need to review and consider policies and develop innovative solutions to the issues of:

- a. Access
- b. Occupiers Liability

6.2.2 There is a need to consider whether the proposed enabling legislation on National Parks fully recognises the importance and potential for recreation and enjoyment.

6.2.3. There is a need to review and further develop policies and commitment to outdoor recreation on Executive, Departmental, Local Authority and National Governing Body levels.

6.2.4 There is a need to consider how the Review of Public Administration and the responsibilities of local authorities will impact on outdoor recreation especially through the powers for “well-being”.

6.2.5 There is no statutory requirement for the management of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB’s) and the development of access

within them and there is the potential for the developing National Parks' or other legislation to redress this issue.

- 6.2.6 There is a need for policies that promote and value outdoor recreation from within central and local government and a need for accountability for the delivery and implementation of these.

Question 2

What do you believe are the priorities in terms of legislative or policy reviews that need to take place to develop outdoor recreation?

Question 3

Can you suggest innovative solutions to these issues and can you give examples from other areas / countries?

Question 4

What needs to be done to give outdoor recreation a higher priority within the Executive, Departments and Local Authorities?

- 6.3 **Partnerships and structures for developing, managing and advocating outdoor recreation.**

As there is a great range of organisations and agencies that have an interest in outdoor recreation there is a risk of independent working and duplication as well as certain aspects being neglected due to silo thinking. While there are some very good examples of co-ordination and joined up working, there are further opportunities to create stronger mechanisms to help achieve the vision to continue to build a dynamic culture of sustainable outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland.

- 6.3.1 There is a need to consider creating a National Outdoor Recreation or Access Forum that includes organisations that have a duty for the provision and management of infrastructure. Consideration needs to be given to the membership and the changes within CAAN and also how government departments work with each other to develop policy and direction (this was previously the Countryside Access Liaison Group).
- 6.3.2 There are currently 4 Local Outdoor Recreation Forums which have had a mixed level of success in delivering outcomes and ensuring that there is genuine engagement between authorities and users. These could be further developed and new ones established in strategically important areas.
- 6.3.3 The value of outdoor recreation to the achievement of health and well being is well recognised and should be a central part of health policy. There needs to be a mechanism to ensure that health authorities are part of the above structures.
- 6.3.4 There is a need to develop links between the land owners, land managers, activity providers, “outdoor” retailers, service and hospitality providers and policy makers.
- 6.3.5 There needs to be guidance and possibly charters as a method for ensuring that partnerships work to mutually benefit all parties.

Question 5

What structures or partnerships do you believe are required for the delivery of the vision and its aims?

6.4 Investment of time, energy and resources.

The importance of innovation, sustainability and buy in from the public, private and community/voluntary sectors and users are becoming increasingly important to continue to build a dynamic culture of sustainable outdoor

recreation in Northern Ireland.

- 6.4.1 Outdoor recreation is both cross departmental and cross sectoral in the benefits it brings and therefore policy development within government departments needs to be reviewed and the value of outdoor recreation realised and articulated.
- 6.4.2 There is a need for a strong connection between outdoor volunteering and the developing Volunteering Strategy.
- 6.4.3 There is a need to consider how best to organise volunteer involvement, bringing together partners from the public, private and third sector to strengthen the volunteering infrastructure in outdoor recreation.
- 6.4.4 Volunteering has rarely enjoyed as much public support from government as it does now. To benefit from this and to try to counteract any decline in volunteering, the profile of outdoor recreation volunteering needs to be raised to build on this policy support to ensure it is well positioned to secure recognition and funding .
- 6.4.5 There needs to be consideration as to the value that users place on sites. Given the diminishing public funding there needs to be some innovative thinking about how to develop and maintain future facilities without always seeking public body funding.
- 6.4.6 There is a need to build capacity by offering training and working with excluded groups but opportunities to make progress are limited by a shortage of funding which has restricted the focus on a limited range of activities.

Question 6

What are the key issues that you have faced with respect to current funding arrangements?

Question 7

How can the benefits of volunteering be fully realised to develop outdoor recreation?

Question 8

What innovative approaches to investment in facilities and programmes could be developed?

Question 9

Are there ways that users and commercial operators can contribute financially towards the “outdoors”?

6.5. Communication, marketing and promotion.

With the evidence for the growth in interest and participation in outdoor recreation as evidenced through the “Trends” research¹ and the anecdotal growth in outdoor retailers and activity providers there is a real need to ensure that participants know where they can go, how to behave responsibly and what opportunities exist to continue to build a dynamic culture of sustainable outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland.

- 6.5.1 The development of web portals for information on where to get out “near to you” is equally important for the local population as are the “quality products” that are marketed for visitors.
- 6.5.2 The development of the Activity Tourism Sector has had considerable support from public funding. Ownership and support for this from within the industry is important to ensure that it is sustainable in the long term.
- 6.5.3 A significant amount of work has been done in recent years by the agencies with responsibility for outdoor recreation to promote

opportunities and to raise awareness of the issues. In many cases agencies have acted independently of each other and a more coordinated approach would build capacity in the sector and be more cost effective. A more joined approach to branding between public sector organisations for outdoor recreation would also be useful.

6.5.4 Participation in outdoor recreation is one of the main ways of developing environmental awareness and to ensure that users are aware of their responsibilities in protecting the countryside and ensuring that activities are sustainable.

6.5.5 Recent innovations including iPhone apps, GPS, and user generated content through social media enable rapid communication and are capable of reaching a wide range of audiences. Further work needs to be done to identify how these opportunities can be maximised.

Question 10

How can a more co-ordinated approach to promoting and marketing outdoor recreation or aspects of it be developed?

Question 11

How can a greater understanding of the importance of taking personal responsibility for the environment be achieved and what can be done to translate this into change?

Question 12

Do you think that the Leave No Trace ethic is a solution to this or are other measures required?

Question 13

What measures and activities could be developed to communicate the values and benefits of Outdoor Recreation within Northern Ireland?

6.6. Appropriate access and facilities to ensure that current and future participation is sustainable.

With the growth in interest and participation in outdoor recreation as evidenced through the "Trends" research⁴ and the anecdotal growth in outdoor retailers and activity providers there is a need to ensure that this growth can be maximised but that it does not compromise the habitats and ecosystems on which it relies and the livelihoods of land owners and managers.

- 6.6.1 Strategic planning for outdoor recreation can be further improved at both a national and local level.
- 6.6.2 There is a strong need to consider facilities and developments that are attractive to and will engage young people with the outdoors. These tend to involve more exciting activities such as mountain biking.
- 6.6.3 There is a need for a greater network of paths and the development of accessible core paths and community networks need to be considered.
- 6.6.4 There is considerable work that needs to be done to review and mitigate impact and erosion issues at some of the high pressure sites in the Mourne, the North Coast and Antrim Hills to ensure that use is sustainable.
- 6.6.5 There needs to be consideration for appropriate and alternative sites for activities that have a greater impact on the environment and other users like quad biking, motorbike scrambling and youth camping.

- 6.6.6 The management of large scale “events” in sensitive landscapes remains an unresolved issue – although this has been partly done for the Mournes.

Question 14

What is required (locations, facilities, services and/or activities) to provide sufficient and sustainable access and facilities for outdoor recreation?

Question 15

How should strategic planning and provision at a regional and local level be developed?

Question 16

What are the current barriers to the development of facilities?

⁴ Trends in Outdoor Recreation 1995 – 2008 A copy of the full report or the fact sheet can be downloaded from www.countrysiderecreation.com/publications/research-reports/

6.7. Research, monitoring and evaluation to provide for evidence based development and management.

There is a current and continuing need to ensure that we have a sound evidence base on which to base decisions, investment and actions for sustainable outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland.

- 6.7.1 There needs to be some clear guidance on what are the recommended minimum levels of facilities required for outdoor recreation. Planning at local level for this will be important.

- 6.7.2 There needs to be stronger connections with academic institutions especially those with environmental management and leisure and recreation courses.

- 6.7.3 There need to be greater links, sharing information and benchmarking between local authorities to inform the creation and/or development of local plans for outdoor recreation.
- 6.7.4 The capturing of data on participation and the social and economic value of outdoor recreation and activity tourism is crucial to provide evidence for further investment and development.
- 6.7.5 Consideration should be given to the reasons for non participation which may be a result of peoples' changing circumstances, different preferences or actual barriers to participation which are not being addressed.
- 6.7.6 Further scientific research is required to understand the impact of recreation on landscapes and habitats to support land managers to make evidence based decisions about sustainable outdoor recreation.

Question 17

What gaps are there in terms of research into outdoor recreation or key areas where further information is required?

Question 18

Are you aware of mechanisms that could bring a more strategic overview to capturing information?

Question 19

Have you any additional comments about key issues and challenges or the actions and activities required for the development of the Outdoor Recreation Action Plan?

7. Next steps

- 7.1 The consultation period will run until the end of February 2012.
- 7.2 The feedback from the various sector groups and the on line survey will be collated by Sport Northern Ireland and analysed by Outplan and GL Hughes Ltd who have been tasked with writing these up to be included within the draft Action Plan.
- 7.3 The steering group will review and amend the Action Plan as required which will then be issued for final consultation.
- 7.4 This Action Plan will set the agenda and tasks for the next 8 years in line with the timescales for Sport Matters to deliver increased opportunities for sustainable responsible recreation in the natural environment.



8. CONTACT DETAILS

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