

## **Finding new ways to support upland pathwork**

### **Purpose**

1. This paper summarises current work exploring more effective ways to fund and implement upland pathwork.

### **Background**

2. Well maintained upland paths help to safeguard mountain landscapes, upland habitats and the quality of experience enjoyed by recreational users. Upland pathwork can however be difficult to resource, and there have been long-standing challenges in funding both capital works and ongoing maintenance. The industry has also therefore struggled to maintain a critical mass of contractors with the necessary specialist skills.
3. Funding is available for some types of pathwork through the Improving Public Access (IPA) option under the Scottish Rural Development Programme. In view of budget constraints, however, this option is focused on lower cost paths with relatively fixed specifications, allowing the benefits to be spread more widely, and does not include bespoke paths in upland settings.
4. This position prompted renewed discussion during 2015 about how best to support upland pathwork. SNH convened a meeting last November to allow key national bodies to consider this in more detail, and a note of this meeting is attached as an annex.

### **Current activity**

5. The November meeting identified several lines of action which are now being taken forward to raise the profile of upland paths and explore new approaches to funding and implementation:
  - SNH and partners are developing a broad estimate of the cost of outstanding upland path repair and ongoing maintenance across Scotland.
  - SNH has developed a draft research brief to compare approaches taken to support the provision of broadly analogous access infrastructure in other countries. The cost of this work will need to be shared with other bodies and the draft brief will provide a basis for this discussion.
  - The Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust (COAT), SNH and Highlands & Islands Enterprise will meet in the near future to discuss ways in which the cost of maintaining upland paths could be better integrated with promotion of 'adventure tourism'.
  - SNH has drafted a survey questionnaire to get a clearer overview of the opinions of recreational users with regard to upland paths, including the importance that they attach to path maintenance and the relationship between path condition and visitor behaviour.
6. These lines of work will inform the development of a 'business case' for investment in upland paths, set alongside the economic, social and environmental benefits that they provide.

7. We have established a small steering group to co-ordinate this work, which includes a number of key bodies that are engaged in upland pathwork<sup>1</sup>; input will also be obtained from a wider range of interests by correspondence. There is an outstanding question about the possible need for new structures to co-ordinate upland pathwork at regional or national levels, and this will be considered at a later stage once the above actions are in hand.
8. In parallel with this work, SNH has co-ordinated a revision of the key industry reference manuals covering technical path design and the management of upland path projects, with considerable input from partners in the Upland Path Advisory Group. The Upland Pathwork and Upland Path Management manuals are now available at <http://www.snh.gov.uk/land-and-sea/managing-recreation-and-access/access-and-recreation-policy/upland-paths/>.

**Mark Wrightham**  
**Scottish Natural Heritage**  
**April 2016**

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<sup>1</sup> COAT, the John Muir Trust, the National Trust for Scotland, the Nevis Partnership and SNH

## **Annex: Summary of meeting to discuss new approaches to upland paths in Scotland**

**Thursday 19 November 2015  
Battleby**

**Present:** John Thomson (chair), Dougie Baird (Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust; COAT), Kate Barclay (John Muir Trust; JMT), David Cameron (COAT), Fiona Cuninghame (Scottish Natural Heritage; SNH), Dave Ewart (**sportscotland**), Chris Goodman (JMT), Clara Govier (People's Postcode Lottery), Helen Jones (Scottish Government), Beryl Leatherland (Scottish Wild Land Group/Link), Graeme McLean (Developing Mountain Biking in Scotland), Riona McMorrow (Heritage Lottery Fund), Pete Rawcliffe (SNH), Nicole Wallace (Highland Council), Mark Wrightham (SNH).

### **The upland path resource / key issues**

Discussion highlighted a number of key points:

- Scotland's upland paths are an important part of our national recreation infrastructure. Well managed upland paths play a key role in maintaining the quality of experience for hillwalking, climbing and mountain biking, and safeguarding the sensitive landscapes in which these activities take place. They can also help to reduce the impacts of these activities on upland habitats.
- The condition of upland paths varies greatly across Scotland. In areas that are managed by NGOs and public bodies, or where there is a dedicated path management organisation, path condition is generally good. Elsewhere the picture is very mixed, with heavily eroded paths on a number of well-known hills. This reflects a number of practical challenges linked in particular to funding (see below).
- Active recreation is a big economic opportunity and Scotland is being strongly promoted for 'adventure tourism'; these activities are anticipated to increase over time. Wider tourism and promotion of Scotland also trades on the image of iconic hills. It will therefore be important to manage impacts to ensure that the quality of the resource/experience is not degraded; the necessary re-investment is likely to be very small in relation to the income generated by hillwalking, mountain biking and wider marketing of Scotland plc.
- Hillwalking and mountain biking can also contribute significantly to the health and quality of life of participants (maintaining the necessary infrastructure is therefore a type of preventative spend). The policy drive to increase participation has so far focused on lowland/urban paths and greenspace, but upland paths also have an integral and complementary role, as adventurous outdoor activities are more likely to engage some audiences (eg. young people) and provide a progression from less demanding recreation 'close to home'. There is consequently a case for a more integrated approach that recognises the value of both, though this might place greater emphasis on improving access and paths for walking and mountain biking on hill ranges close to the main population centres in lowland Scotland rather than more remote rural areas.
- It was noted that upland pathwork provides rural employment, but there is also a need to maintain the necessary specialist skills (the policy focus on lowlands has been detrimental from this perspective) and sustain this benefit in remoter rural areas. There is also a possible community engagement angle; this work can benefit (and provide

opportunities to engage) both local communities and recreational users – who represent a strong community of interest.

- Some possible tensions were mentioned. Further thinking may be needed to consider how path repair in remoter areas interacts with safety considerations/the 'long walk-in'. In the absence of a more co-ordinated approach to funding, there may also be some tension with the continuing promotion of mountain recreation as above.
- There was broad recognition that the policy profile of upland paths is currently very low. This could perhaps be addressed in part by incorporating this topic into discussion about natural capital (eg. the mountain resource is 'natural capital'; paths help to maintain it). *Note: the [Land Use Strategy 2](#) consultation has been published by SG since the meeting; Proposal 6 refers to the possible development of a strategic vision for the uplands.*

### **Future funding**

- Difficulties can arise in securing funding for both capital works on upland paths and maintenance. This is particularly true with regard to maintenance, which is important to protect the investment and avoid a cycle of heavy repair. An anticipated lack of funding for maintenance can also encourage over-engineering of paths at the outset.
- There was some discussion of the estimated total cost of pathwork and ongoing maintenance at a national level, starting from the £2m quoted in the background paper and drawing on the experience of different partner bodies. There was a common view that it would be helpful to develop a better estimate of the total cost of work needed to bring all of Scotland's upland paths into a sustainable condition and to maintain them thereafter. This should be seen in the context of the economic benefits of hillwalking and mountain biking, which have been broadly estimated as over £100M per year.
- Funding bodies recognise the importance of maintenance and are sometimes able to include some revenue costs. There may be scope to consider different approaches and to respond to changing priorities, taking cues from the sector. It would be helpful for funding bodies to recognise potential 'community benefits' to communities of interest as well as local residents.
- Constraints on public funding are likely to increase and it would therefore be necessary to seek a co-ordinated response to these challenges across all sectors which benefit from this resource –including liaison with enterprise and tourism bodies.
- There may be scope to encourage more voluntary contributions from outdoor users, adventure tourism providers, event organisers and outdoor gear manufacturers. This would not (and could not) represent a charge for activities which are within access rights, and would simply invite users to help support this work. Paras 3.61-62 of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code do however encourage event organisers and outdoor businesses to 'put something back' - and it was noted that some already do this. This may require a degree of cultural change and such approaches would need to be pitched carefully to ensure that the benefits are visible and feel relevant to users.
- Recent HIE research on the Adventure Tourism sector did not refer to safeguarding the underlying resource (see <http://www.hie.co.uk/about-hie/news-and-media/archive/new-research-identifies-growth-opportunities-for-scotland-s-adventure-tourism-sector.html#sthash.n8heyjau.dpbs>) and there may be an opportunity for further discussion with HIE on the back of this study.

- Car park charging had worked well for COAT in Glen Muick, though it was noted that the introduction of parking charges in other contexts had sometimes been controversial.
- Local fundraising groups (eg. 'Friends of...') can make a useful contribution, but need consistent support to maintain interest.
- Some other countries use systems such as 'tourist taxes' or collaborative arrangements between local tourism businesses to help maintain recreation infrastructure; it may be helpful to collate an overview of approaches used elsewhere.

### **Delivery mechanisms**

- Scotland is in some respects well positioned - with a lot of experience in this area and a lot of goodwill within the sector.
- The key need is to bring together both funders and 'deliverers' in areas where work is required. In principle, it may be advantageous to have a single, clear lead organisation which could co-ordinate at a national level and might be more attractive to funders. The remit of a body such as Paths for All might in theory be extended to upland paths, but this is some way from PFAP's current focus. There was also some support for the establishment of a new body for this purpose.
- An alternative may be to develop new bodies to address geographical gaps; the Arran Trust or Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) may be useful models. In broad terms, the greatest geographical gaps may be in the north and west. There was a suggestion that projects should ideally be large enough to include whole areas which provide destinations for tourism and outdoor recreation.
- Any such new bodies would need to engage effectively with private landowners as the balance of need is generally now on private land. It was noted that land managers are unlikely to maintain paths which are of no direct use for land management.
- Such bodies would also need to be large enough (with sufficient resources) to pursue funding opportunities.
- There was a range of views, but the current overall balance of opinion suggested that the creation of one or more new national/regional intermediary bodies was not necessarily desirable (or likely) at present. There is a more immediate need for better co-ordination between existing bodies, and the possible establishment of any new bodies could be revisited thereafter.
- Whatever approach is taken, it would be desirable to generate a large enough body of work to maintain skills within the sector. Other approaches could also help to maintain and broaden the skills base (eg. JMT's collaboration with Elmwood College to develop pathwork skills).
- There was also some discussion of the potential role of volunteers in undertaking pathwork on the ground. Volunteers can play a role but require skilled support, and are more effective for monitoring (eg. the COAT Adopt a Path scheme) and lighter maintenance (e.g. JMT and NTS work parties) than for heavy repair work. The scale of the latter (across Scotland) is in any case too great for volunteers to make a significant contribution.

## Summary and next steps

There appeared to be a good level of agreement on the significance of the issue, and in particular on the need to find a much more effective way to fund ongoing maintenance. It will be necessary both to raise the profile of upland pathwork and achieve a more co-ordinated approach across the sector (probably led by SNH) – which would depend on a shared recognition of the need by all relevant bodies. The following immediate actions were identified:

- **SNH** to consider undertaking background research (probably in-house) to review approaches taken to fund provision and maintenance of access infrastructure in other countries.
- **SNH and partners** to collaborate to develop a national ‘light touch’ audit of upland paths, starting from the background paper provided for this meeting and including both repair and maintenance costs.
- **SNH** to consider ways to gather information on public attitudes to enjoyment of upland areas to help build the case for future public investment in path management and development, ideally through existing surveys.
- **SNH and partners** to develop the above into a ‘business case’ combining the estimated nationwide cost of repairing and maintaining upland paths with the likely returns (the social, economic and environmental benefits this will help to safeguard).
- **SNH and COAT** to discuss ways of integrating promotion and maintenance of the resource, and the above actions, with HIE and VisitScotland.

Several longer-term tasks were also noted:

- There is a need to raise the profile of this issue with all relevant stakeholders, including commercial interests and public bodies, and the above ‘business case’ should help with this.
- Partners should aim to help foster a culture in which users expect to contribute to the upkeep of paths in hill areas.
- The range of delivery options, including the possibility of one or more new facilitating bodies, should be reviewed at a later stage in light of the above actions.

**SNH** will convene a small steering group to oversee the above work.

**Mark Wraitham**  
**Scottish Natural Heritage**  
**December 2015**