



THE MOUNTAINEERING COUNCIL OF SCOTLAND

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10/6/08

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Highland Council Access Strategy 2008-2011 MCofS Comments

Foreword

The MCofS supports the statement that “the Council is very conscious of its new duties in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 to maintain access to all of its land on behalf of both visitors and residents alike.” It needs to be borne in mind that the right of responsible access is to the area of Highland, and not just paths. Linear access receives much greater emphasis in the Strategy. Although this is an important mechanism to facilitate and encourage access, this emphasis needs to be balanced throughout the Strategy, and we would suggest that this needs reinforcement. I have taken the opportunity below to address where this might best be done.

Chapter 1 : Vision Statement

Primarily, this statement is based on linear access and facility provision. As a vision, it should also express the aspirations of the many access users in Highland that visit and reside here to enjoy the relatively unfettered access to areas of open hill. The inclusion of a vision of access across the council area being a positive experience for access users and land managers alike would encompass the aspiration that there was a positive partnership approach to hill access without problems such as disrupted stalks, unwelcoming signs or physical barriers such as fences without crossing points. “Facilities” and “networks” are not the only ways to achieve access opportunities. This may have been the intention of the final bullet point, but if so, it would benefit from being made more explicit.

Chapter 3 : Access Audit

Finance and Staffing Audit

The “constraint that this is capital input but there are no running revenue / maintenance monies” emphasises the need for prioritisation of sourcing maintenance funds else for core and non-core paths alike. It would be of concern if there were increasing path creation while existing paths fall into disrepair, including any created under the core paths plan. The strategy should include a priority to source such funds.

Staffing

It is noted that the SOAC promotion takes up 20% of the work of Rangers. This is valuable work, however the Strategy makes no commitment to continuing Ranger financing past the date on which SNH withdraws funding. The Strategy needs to make a commitment to ensure SOAC continues to be promoted locally, and not just centrally by SNH.

Chapter 4 : Aims and Objectives

The MCofS supports the aims of meeting community aspirations, improving health and transport, enhancing cultures and lifelong learning. However, all the stated aims are tied to paths ie linear access. There would be benefit in including an aim applicable to wider access. The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 is based on access to almost all land and water in Scotland, not just paths. There is also concern that promotion of linear routes concentrates pressure. There is therefore benefit in promoting general off-path access use in addition to path-based access. The outdoor resource potential in Highland is huge, and a great asset for the area.

Chapter 5 : Outdoor Access and the Community Plan

The MCofS welcomes the commitment that “priority will be given to promoting / maintaining existing paths rather than developing new ones.” The MCofS supports this aspiration, however in order to achieve this funds need to be secured for maintenance. As noted in previous sections, there is only funding in relation to core paths for creation, and not maintenance. This apparent gap between aims and resources needs to be bridged.

The MCofS is happy to be considered as a potential partner in achieving the plan. However, we suggest that early contact be made to discuss potential projects.

Developing a Strong, Sustainable and Competitive Economy

The long term goal of achieving a difference through “better planning and direction of maintenance and investment in the access resource” is a desirable aim. The Strategy however, is unclear in respect to the resources available for this maintenance and investment. An indication, in the audit section, of resources intended for these purposes should be included.

Developing Safe, Strong and Attractive Communities

The aim of developing a strong community ownership and taking responsibility requires that the skills for doing so exist within the community. The path maintenance training that was run at Lochaber College would be a useful guide to how this may be achieved. We note with pleasure that the Nevis Partnership, with the Council's support is continuing this work.

Chapter 6 : Building the Core Path Plan

The MCofS welcomes the recognition that “access rights are not limited to core paths.” However, we have some concerns that there are resource implications of concentration on core paths. Feedback from Access Officers across Scotland suggest that because of the timetable and high profile of core paths, there has been little reinforcement of non-path access rights and responsibilities from the perspective of access users and land managers. It must be borne in mind when prioritising that there is much value in non-path access, especially in the Highland area. This is particularly important in attempts to “secure additional financial resources to implement Core Paths Plan and maintain paths infrastructure.” Upland paths maintenance is a priority in Highland as it has an impact on landscape, biodiversity and soil conservation. Consequently, it also has implications for the visitor and community experience of the area beyond the immediate vicinity of settlements.

The MCofS has some concern over the identification of core paths on OS maps. In some locations this may pose a problem through loss of some of the navigational information on the map. This information is necessary for safety such as crag features, close contour variance etc. An example where this may present a problem is near complex route-finding such on Stac Pollaidh. This needs to be considered.

The MCofS welcomes the recognition that there will be a variation in standard of path according to location. The Strategy bases an assessment on expectation of the standard of the path. However, the difficulty with this is that all core paths will be marked on maps, and have the same style of signage. This may set up an expectation that all core paths are of similar standard to each other. We agree that “the surface underfoot may reflect local terrain and be a significant part of a route’s attraction and identity.” Possibly categorisation of core paths based on style of access would be appropriate to modulate expectations, or to provide criteria of path standard appropriate in different contexts.

Environmental Report

Table 3

16. It is unclear how the “total area of remote landscapes of value for recreation (or wild land)” is to be measured. How is it to be judged whether a landscape is of value for recreation? Either this caveat should be removed, or a clearer measurement be used.

Table 4

The MCofS welcomes the recognition that there are potential implications of development and promotion of access. We have particular concerns for the promotion of routes vulnerable to erosion without effective monitoring of the effects and funds for necessary repair if there are adverse impacts.

We welcome the commitment to protect and enhance non-designated area habitats and species. This is not, however carried through to consideration of the first objective in Appendix D. This commitment should be included in the key success factors, mitigation and monitoring box, and not made specific to designated sites.

Safety is also an issue in more upland areas. Even when there is a path, the route can be obliterated in snow, and lost in thick cloud. Safety information should be promoted alongside any promotion of routes that may be affected by this issue. This applies to some core paths.

Assessment of Environmental Effects ...

The MCofS welcomes the recognition that “much of the Highlands outwith designated sites is still of outstanding importance.”

As mentioned in comments under table 4, monitoring is required to assess when “adverse impacts cannot be managed.” Consideration of the detail of how this monitoring is to be undertaken needs to be prioritised. Baseline data needs to be available when making an assessment of the impacts of promotion, and indicators agreed in order to judge when promotion is having a significant adverse effect requiring promotion of other sites to relieve the pressure.

Appendix D

The commitment to non-designated site protection and enhancement needs to be continued throughout this detailed consideration of the objectives. The recognition of the importance of non-designated sites has not been continued through this section. In particular, areas with wild land characteristics must be carefully considered. A significant feature of the Highlands both for residents and visitors, are its wild land characteristics. There is no wild land designation, therefore it needs careful consideration in applying monitoring and mitigation measures. This is particularly important when repairing / upgrading paths as a path construction appropriate for a path close to a settlement is not likely to be appropriate to an area with wild land characteristics. Active consultation needs to go beyond local interest groups where it involves nationally important sites for recreation and wild land. The MCofS would welcome engagement in such consultations.

Appendix E

Concerns about the potential “proliferations of signs” are not fully allayed by the statement that “signs will only be installed at path start point or where core paths are unclear to follow.” This may be interpreted to mean a sign at path junctions. This may be appropriate along paths in lowland setting, but would not be appropriate in more upland settings. In these contexts, users of the path should be advised to be prepared to navigate themselves due to the potential for losing the path as described in comments under table 4.

Appendix F

Prioritising expenditure (if funding is available) is difficult due to the lack of co-ordinated data on routes where there is potential for erosion, or is already occurring. As explained earlier, this issue is not specific to designated sites, although it is recognised there will be more data about these sites. Ideally, there should be a baseline condition survey of access routes (including, but not solely, core paths and designated sites). Paths could then be prioritised across Highland based on relative impact. This appendix only refers to vulnerable paths on designated sites with reference to conservation of biodiversity, flora and fauna, although the Strategy, as stated previously, recognised the outstanding importance outwith designated sites. This needs to be reflected in the monitoring.

Please do not hesitate to contact me to discuss these issues further.

Yours sincerely

Hebe Carus
Access & Conservation Officer