

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL
PLANNING, ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
21 JANUARY 2009

Agenda Item	
Report No	

PATHS POLICY: A Consultation Paper by Scottish Natural Heritage
Report by Director of Planning & Development

SUMMARY

This report introduces a recent Scottish Natural Heritage consultation on a draft paths policy statement. The short consultation period sought responses by 15 December 2008. A Highland Council response was submitted by the deadline and following consultation with the Chairman (Appendix 1). Additional comments may be submitted if Members wish to do so. Following approval by the board of Scottish Natural Heritage the new policy will be implemented.

Copies of the consultation paper are available in the Members Lounge and from: <http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/strategy/SNHPathsPolicy.pdf> A copy is also available on the Member's bulletin.

The report recommends that Committee:

- (a) Consider and homologate the response already submitted on behalf of the Council (Appendix 1), and;
- (b) Agree any further comments to be passed to Scottish Natural Heritage.

1. Background

- 1.1 The draft Paths Policy proposes a new vision for Scotland's paths and sets out the key actions by SNH and other national and local stakeholders to deliver it. The policy develops the priorities established in Scottish Natural Heritage's overarching policy statement on 'Enjoying the Outdoors' (2008).
- 1.2 The policy statement promotes the importance of paths in contributing to a range of Government priorities, including improving health and well-being, tourism, place-making and sustainable transport. Key elements of the draft policy include:
 - strategic actions, including priorities for further paths delivery, better investment in existing and new paths, and improved paths promotion;
 - action for paths in different settings, covering local path networks, long distance routes and upland paths;

- suggested roles for SNH and other key organisations.

2. Proposed key outcomes from the draft Paths Policy

2.1 The draft policy recognises that, while good progress has been made in recent years to develop paths, there remains significant potential to improve and make more of this resource to increase levels of participation and maximise the benefits in terms of health, the economy and countering climate change. To achieve this, further action is needed to deliver the following outcomes:

- paths will be better promoted and used by everyone more regularly. Increased use of all paths, particularly by new users, will help to share the benefits across society;
- work on local path networks, including core paths, will have delivered routes which are accessible to all;
- a more coherent network of long distance routes will have been established for longer journeys and improvements to upland paths will provide more sustainable access to our finest mountains.

3. Highland Council Response

The Highland Council response is attached at Appendix 1 for the consideration and approval of Committee. Additional comments may be submitted if required.

4. Fit with the Programme for the Highland Council 2009 - 2011

4.1 It is suggested that the Council's response to the SNH Paths Policy consultation contributes to achievement of the following Council priorities:

- Focus on safe school transport encouraging more healthy and environmental options such as 'walk to school' pathways, safety support and safe cycle tracks.
- Implement a system of core path plans for the Highlands.
- Develop Highland tourism.

5. Resource Implications

There are no resource implications arising from this report.

RECOMMENDATION

That Committee:

- (b) Consider and homologate the response already submitted on behalf of the Council (Appendix 1), and;
- (b) Agree any further comments to be passed to Scottish Natural Heritage.

Signature:

Designation: Director of Planning and Development

Date: 5th January 2009

Author: George Duff (Ext: 2279)

Ref:

Background Papers

1. Scottish Natural Heritage: PATHS POLICY Consultation: October 2008

Peter Rawcliffe
Quality of Life Unit Manager
Scottish Natural Heritage
Great Glen House
Inverness

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Our Ref: **GH**
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Date: **16 December, 2008**

Dear Mr Rawcliffe

SNH CONSULTATION – SNH PATHS POLICY

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above. I submit the following response on behalf of the Highland Council. You should note that because of the timescale set out for this consultation we have not been able to consult the Council's Planning, Environment and Development Committee but will do so on 21st January, following which any further comments will be sent to you. Meantime, I trust that these comments will be considered in your deliberations.

The Highland Council broadly welcomes the draft SNH Paths Policy and recognises the context within which it has been prepared. The Council recognises the importance of paths in the delivery of a range of the Scottish Government's priorities; is committed to managing and developing the existing resource and will consider further developments in all three categories identified; local path networks, long distance routes and upland paths. The Council notes that the draft policy does not appear to differentiate between these three categories in relation to priorities. Local authorities must concentrate on outcomes that satisfy the Government's broad objectives and the targets set out within the Single Outcome Agreement. As a result local authorities may not be able to consider all categories as equal priority if indeed this was SNH's intention.

A commitment to improving the promotion of paths is welcomed but the Council also wishes to improve accessibility of information to encourage all potential users to make use of the paths resource.

Highland Council considers that the main challenge remains the availability of sustainable revenue funding for access management and welcomes the commitment to seek improved investment in paths. The statement (Page 4, section 5) on funding through LMCs (now Rural Development Contracts), does not recognise that historically funding has seldom been spent where people chose to walk, cycle or ride and so did not support the network identified via the core path planning process. Clarity is therefore required to match available funding with core path planning objectives.

A further concern in relation to the use of SRDP funding is that capital ceilings are set very low. As a result of this, the Programme doesn't appear, at the moment, to offer a realistic alternative source of access funding

The questions posed in this consultation are considered below:

(a) Is the scope of the policy sufficient to address current paths issues?

The document appears to deal with most of the recognised issues. However the Council is surprised at the specific exclusion of the National Cycle Network (NCN) from the review. The NCN, whilst ostensibly providing paths for cycling, is used by walkers and horse riders, particularly in the urban or close to urban areas, and has much potential for a higher level of use.

(b) Do you agree with the policy's position that more work is required to improve the paths resource and to increase participation levels?

The existing paths network, core paths, wider access network and long distance routes provide a major contribution to both local and visitor spend in the Highlands. Highland Council agrees that there are areas where path improvements are needed and much work has already been done to encourage wider usage. The Highland Council seeks to provide greater access support and look closely at the potential for expansion of the existing resource. However, as mentioned earlier, the Council is concerned about the source and the sustainability of future funding.

(c) Do you agree with the proposed strategic action? Do you agree with the proposed actions for paths in different settings?

The strategic actions for local path networks appear to cover the main issues. However the Council has some concerns regarding the proposed actions for Long Distance Routes. The existing national LDRs were established following extensive consultations, operate under nationally agreed standards and have the commitment of local authorities for their future management. They are comprehensively way-marked and have an established management set up. A number of new routes have been promoted in recent years but questions must be asked regarding their long term future funding. With this in mind the establishment of further LDRs, although desirable in some areas, would only increase the budgetary pressures on the existing routes and this needs careful consideration.

The ability to source development and management funding will be seriously compromised with the removal of SNH support.

The issue of multi-use on LDRs should not be taken lightly. It has been recognised in the draft policy that multi-use should be pursued where feasible. However, it should also be recognised that not all paths have to be multi-use particularly if there is no evidence of demand and recognition that there may be suitable alternative provision nearby.

Therefore, it should also be recognised that all LDRs should not necessarily be upgraded along the entirety of their length for multi-use.

The very nature of a path and its setting provides the users with a special experience and whilst this is something all users would expect consideration should be given to what else is in the area. For example if a path has been created for or is suitable predominantly for walkers there may very well be an adjacent path or paths which could provide for cycle, equestrian and disabled use.

Highland Council is not convinced that the introduction of a kite-marking system for LDRs would be appropriate at this stage. As mentioned previously the national LDR standards have served well and the Council believes that it would be more appropriate to consider whether routes are fit for purpose. The Council is committed to improvements on the LDRs and other paths where appropriate, but the availability of funding continues to limit opportunities.

Highland Council would wish to see some areas identified and promoted as 'wilderness areas'. Investment would be required for key bridges for example but sign-posting and way-marking may be installed at relatively low cost and may be generally unnecessary.

(d) Are there particular actions which should be the highest priorities?

At this stage the Council suggests that the priorities are;

- Promoting the four national LDRs and core path networks
- Developing sustainable funding mechanisms for path maintenance and improvement.
- Raising the standard of core paths in and around settlements with a focus on areas not well provided for, and to ensure existing paths are fit for purpose.

(e) Do you agree with the proposed roles for SNH and other key stakeholders?

SNH identifies a key leadership role for themselves. However their effectiveness may diminish when they are no longer involved in directly funding local authorities, or local authority led projects.

Highland Council remains concerned about the future funding of path works and that there may be a loss of co-ordination and momentum following the change in SNH's role. For the LDRs therefore, the Council hopes that there will be a continuation of the LDR Forum, with SNH involved in an advisory role.

(f) What could your organisation contribute to the policy implementation?

The Highland Council is committed to working with SNH and to developing and managing paths where appropriate throughout the Highlands. It will continue to be a major player in the management of LDRs and will seek to cultivate partnerships for the future development of paths in all sectors.

Wider access networks and aspirational routes will not be included in the adopted core path plans but the opportunity exists to incorporate the information already gathered into an overview which would allow prioritisation of funding towards developing and managing the wider paths resource. A partnership approach will be an important part of taking this work forward

(g) Can you suggest a new name for Scotland's network of statutory and non-statutory long distance routes which will brand and promote it more effectively?

LDR branding has existed since the opening of the West Highland Way in 1980 and has become well established with the development of the Speyside Way, Southern Upland Way and Great Glen Way. This brand represents the premier LDRs, based on substantial investment from both the public and commercial sectors and the aspiration to achieve the nationally agreed LDR Standards. Newer routes have not been through the stringent 'statutory' establishment process and the commitment to their future management is uncertain.

For this reason Highland Council urges caution when considering the extension or alteration of the LDR branding. LDRs are already an excellent product which showcase Scotland as a prime location for primarily, long distance walking. The Council does not believe that it would be easy, or is necessary; to find one name that captures the variety of paths that Scotland has to offer.

A further point, Highland Council believes that Rights of Way should also be considered when naming Scotland's routes.

I hope that this is helpful. If you wish to discuss any of the points raised please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely

Geoff Robson
Head of Environment and Development