

Orkney Outdoor Access Strategy

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Introduction

The Orkney Outdoor Access Strategy sets out Orkney Islands Council's priorities for the provision of outdoor access in Orkney.

The Access Strategy provides a framework to guide the development and management of outdoor access throughout the islands. It defines aims and objectives that will help Orkney to develop access in a co-ordinated fashion. It also contains an action plan, which will translate the strategy's aims into a series of proposals that can be taken forward and implemented.

The strategy examines the current provision for access in Orkney and looks at future needs and demands. Using this information it sets out the key issues that need to be addressed and identifies the priorities for improving outdoor access in Orkney. It also identifies key action areas, such as the coastline and farmland, and considers the problems and opportunities associated with these specific areas. It identifies a wide range of user groups and seeks to provide access opportunities for people of all ages and abilities.

Local Authorities have new duties under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 which came into effect on February 9th 2005. The Act creates a new statutory right of responsible access over most land and inland water. It places nine duties upon the Council and gives it eleven new powers to facilitate these duties. This strategy should help to ensure that the Council is able to fulfil its duties under the new legislation.

The Access Audit

The preparation of the Orkney Outdoor Access Strategy began with a comprehensive audit, which looked at current provision for outdoor access and the existing and potential demand for walking, cycling, horse riding and other outdoor activities. It also covered the policies and resources that are available to support access provision. The audit included consultation with agencies, organisations, the Local Access Forum, local communities, land managers and a range of access user groups.

The supply audit examined existing provision for access throughout the islands. The results showed there are a number of opportunities for outdoor access available, including public rights of way, paths promoted by the Council and routes developed by individual landowners or local community groups. There are also areas used informally by the public for recreational access.

The supply audit also highlighted problems with the current provision. In many areas existing routes do not link up to form effective path networks. Approximately a third of the public rights of way are in poor condition, blocked or overgrown. Many of the routes are not accessible for all user groups or for people of all abilities. There is also a lack of signposting, interpretation and information to help the public make the most of the access opportunities available.

The demand audit clearly showed there is a need to increase opportunities for outdoor access in Orkney. Public consultation with local communities showed there is a demand for new routes. More circular routes, coastal paths and improved access to amenity sites seemed to be high priorities for most access users. Improved information about access was also a high priority with both locals and visitors unsure of where they can go in the countryside.

Tourism is playing an increasingly important role in the Orkney economy and there is currently a high usage of existing access by visitors. The audit revealed a definite desire from tourists for the development of new routes and for improved provision of signage, interpretation and walks leaflets.

The policy and resource audits showed how outdoor access can have an input to a wide range of initiatives. It has a role to play in promoting healthy living and social inclusion, as well as supporting tourism in fragile communities and protecting the natural environment.

A detailed report of the audit findings can be found on the Orkney Islands Council website.

The audit and stakeholder consultations highlighted a number of key issues and themes, which have been used to shape the Outdoor Access Strategy. The next sections cover the vision, aims and key themes that have been identified and developed from the findings of the audit.

A Vision for Outdoor Access in Orkney

This section provides an overall vision and key aims for the development of outdoor access in Orkney. The vision and aims have been developed from the findings of the access audit and through wide public consultation on outdoor access.

A Vision for Outdoor Access in Orkney:

‘To promote enjoyment of the outdoors by providing high quality access provision, which satisfies the needs and aspirations of the local community and visitors to the islands.’

Key Aims

The Strategy identifies the following key aims:

1. To provide a co-ordinated, actively promoted and well maintained network of paths.
2. To provide a range of access opportunities suitable for different user groups and people of all abilities which are safe, welcoming and enjoyable.
3. To work with land managers to achieve a balance between the needs of access users and the needs of those living and working on the land.
4. To ensure that local communities, land managers, access user groups and partner organisations are involved in the development of access in Orkney.
5. To promote responsible behaviour in the countryside, through education and information.

Key Themes for Outdoor Access

Introduction

This section of the strategy sets out the priorities and guiding principles for outdoor access in Orkney as a whole. A number of key themes have been identified, which reflect the vision and aims of the strategy. These themes are developed in this section by highlighting key issues and outlining proposals which will be carried forward to resolve these issues.

The Key Themes covered in this section are:

- **Access for all**
- **Developing paths**
- **Information, promotion and education**
- **Active living**
- **Tourism**
- **Working with land managers**
- **Heritage, conservation and the environment**
- **Maintaining the access infrastructure**

Access for All

This strategy aims to provide access opportunities for countryside users of all abilities.

People enjoy the countryside in many different ways and have different expectations and needs. The strategy needs to consider ramblers undertaking a day long hike, as well as families with young children going for a gentle stroll, or a disabled person in a wheelchair. Some people can manage to walk on rough heather and climb over high stiles, while others need smooth paths with seats to rest on. It is therefore important that a wide range of access opportunities are provided, while appreciating that not all routes can be all ability paths.

The strategy also needs to consider the needs of other user groups – not everyone requires foot access - cyclists, horse riders and carriage drivers also need opportunities for off road access.

Key Issues

- A need for more opportunities for people of all abilities to enjoy access to the countryside
- A need to ensure that facilities associated with outdoor access, eg toilets, are suitable for disabled users
- A need to develop more bridleways and routes suitable for carriage drivers
- A need to develop off road cycle routes in the countryside
- A need to develop further safe cycle routes in towns and villages

Improving Access for All

Next Steps

Proposal 1

To carry out an audit of existing access provision and associated facilities, to assess its suitability for disabled and less able people. Implement improvements to existing routes where practical and feasible.

Proposal 2

To consult with relevant parties, such as the Orkney Disability Forum, to help identify the access requirements and priorities for disabled and less able people.

Proposal 3

To develop new access opportunities for disabled and less able people identified in Proposals 1 and 2, where practical and feasible.

Proposal 4

To develop multi-user routes near to settlements, providing links between housing areas, shops, schools, workplaces and amenity areas.

Proposal 5

To carry out an audit of existing routes to assess their accessibility for cyclists, horse riders and carriage drivers and make improvements where feasible or practical.

To be aware of the needs of cyclists, horse riders and carriage drivers when developing new routes.

Developing Paths

Paths are the key to managing access in Orkney. The majority of land in Orkney is enclosed farmland, with extensive barbed wire or electric fencing which does not facilitate public access. Coupled with this is the high density of livestock, particularly cattle, which also makes access to many areas difficult. Farmers have valid concerns about public access through fields with livestock, especially if visitors have dogs. While the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 gives a right of responsible access to enclosed land, both access users and farmers would prefer to see marked routes developed which avoid fields with livestock, or other sensitive areas.

A number access opportunities already exist in Orkney, including paths promoted by the Council and approximately 150 public rights of way. However, the access audit showed there is a demand for more paths, especially coastal routes, circular paths and routes to popular amenity sites.

The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 also establishes a duty on the Council to develop a Core Paths Network. This is a basic framework of paths which will give the public reasonable access throughout the county. The Core Paths Network can include existing routes, public rights of way, new paths and even quiet roads.

Key Issues

- The need to manage access over enclosed farmland
- A demand for the development of new paths
- OIC has a duty to create a Core Paths Network for Orkney.
- OIC has a duty to keep open and free from obstruction existing public rights of way and uphold the right of responsible access created by the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003.

Developing New Paths

Next Steps

Proposal 6

The Council will work in partnership with land managers to develop paths over their land that will help reduce conflicts between farming and recreational access.

Proposal 7

The Council will prepare a Core Paths Plan in consultation with land managers, access users, local communities and other stakeholders. The resulting path network will increase access opportunities for all recreational access users. It will include existing paths and rights of way as well as new routes.

Proposal 8

The Council will continue to investigate public rights of way disputes and resolve the issues where possible.

Proposal 9

The Council will develop guidance on developing fit for purpose, safe paths. This will assist land managers who are developing paths as part of their Land Management Contracts.

Information, Promotion and Education

One of the key points arising from the access audit was the need for the promotion of paths. People are unsure of where they can walk and feel unwelcome and insecure in the countryside. Many routes are not signposted and only a limited number of walks leaflets and maps are currently available. Promotion of routes is vital if people are to enjoy the countryside and use it confidently and without conflict.

It is also crucial that the public use the countryside responsibly. Better understanding of countryside issues and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code can be reached through the provision of information and interpretation.

Raising awareness of the responsibilities of access users and land managers will help to ensure that countryside access takes place without problems or conflict.

Key Issues

- Paths are inadequately signposted and promoted
- Information about routes is not readily available
- The need to promote responsible use of the countryside and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code through education

Promoting Outdoor Access

Next Steps

Proposal 10

To ensure that all routes to be included in the Core Paths Plan are adequately signposted and waymarked.

Proposal 11

To ensure that all core paths are well promoted through the provision of interpretation boards, walks leaflets, websites and other appropriate media.

Proposal 12

To work in consultation with landowners, Visit Orkney and local communities to provide the required signposting, interpretation and information.

Proposal 13

To work with SNH to promote and publicise the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and to ensure access users and land managers are aware of their responsibilities.

Proposal 14

To include information about responsible use of the countryside on all interpretation boards, leaflets and other promotional material.

Proposal 15

To develop the Ranger Service in Orkney to provide ‘on the ground’ advice and help to locals and tourists.

Active Living

It is now widely recognised that lack of exercise is a major contributor towards many health problems including heart disease and obesity. As a nation, Scotland is inactive, unfit and increasingly overweight.

The promotion of walking and cycling is seen as a key means to encourage more people to take exercise. Providing adequate access provision that is suitable for all users and close to where they live, is the first step towards encouraging walking. The Safe Routes to School initiative, which provides off road walkways and cycle ways in towns and villages, encourages children to walk or cycle to school and reduces the use of cars for short journeys.

Providing the infrastructure is only the first step, people also need to be encouraged to go out and walk. Health walk schemes range from group walks lead by voluntary walk leaders, to leaflets which encourage walking and GP referral schemes. There is a national programme 'Paths for Health' which supports initiatives that stimulate interest in walking - the 'Strollers and Striders' walking group, recently set up in Stromness by the Health Promotion Officer with the NHS, was funded through this programme.

Key Issues

- The need to increase activity levels in the general population to improve health
- The need to provide access opportunities which encourage people to walk and cycle
- The need to stimulate public interest in walking and cycling as a means to improve their health

Promoting Healthy Lifestyles

Next Steps

Proposal 16

To promote paths as a way of encouraging more active lifestyles.

Proposal 17

To encourage the development of initiatives which stimulate community participation in outdoor access activities and publicise these initiatives widely.

To support initiatives which promote walking and cycling to school, work or local services.

Proposal 18

To work closely with the NHS to develop walking for health initiatives.

Tourism

Countryside access has an important role to play in supporting the local tourist economy. Many activities enjoyed by visitors rely on a good access infrastructure. These include access to historical sites, access to sites for bird watching and access to popular amenity areas such as beaches and cliffs. Walking is the second most popular activity for visitors and most tourists will walk as part of their holiday.

Tourism is very important for the more remote islands and they see paths as a useful way of attracting visitors to the islands and encouraging them to stay longer.

Promotion of paths and access is obviously a crucial part of developing access for tourists. The audit showed that visitors feel unsure about where they can go in the countryside and prefer to use well-signposted, clear routes.

The aim of the access strategy should be to support the sustainable development of the tourist industry by helping to increase the length of stay and promote a wider spread of visitors and increase their expenditure.

Key Issues

- A need to provide further opportunities for countryside access for visitors
- A need to improve information about access opportunities for visitors
- Provision of parking facilities/viewpoints for key routes and sites
- Provision of toilets at key countryside sites

Developing Access Provision for Tourists

Next Steps

Proposal 19

Ensure visitors have adequate information about existing and new paths, through development of leaflets, interpretation, websites and other materials.

Proposal 20

Work with local communities to ensure countryside access contributes to local tourism developments.

Proposal 21

Develop essential facilities at key countryside sites, such as parking facilities, toilets and picnic benches, where appropriate and feasible.

Proposal 22

To further develop the Ranger Service in Orkney to provide information for visitors on a range of subjects including promoted walks, the SOAC, natural heritage and archaeology. A Ranger Service will also provide talks and guided walks for visitors.

Working with Land Managers

Paths can only be developed with the support of land managers. The extent of the existing paths in Orkney shows how forward thinking local landowners have been with regard to developing managed access.

However, land managers do have concerns about the new access right and how it could affect their work. Issues that concern farmers include dogs not under proper control; people and dogs in fields with livestock; gates being left open and gates being blocked by cars. It is important that land manager concerns are fully appreciated and understood and they are consulted fully in the development of the Core Paths Network.

Land managers also need to be aware of their responsibilities under the new access legislation and the SOAC.

The new Land Management Contracts provide access options for land managers, by offering funding for maintenance of paths, signage and some infrastructure.

Key Issues

- Conflict between the needs of access users and land managers
- The need for land managers to be aware of their responsibilities in the SOAC

Access and Land Managers

Next Steps

Proposal 23

Land manager's interests should continue to be represented on the Local Access Forum.

Proposal 24

Access planning, development and management should take into account the needs, concerns and wishes of land managers.

Proposal 25

Land managers and organisations such as NFU, FWAG and SEERAD should be fully consulted during the development of the Core Paths Plan.

Proposal 26

OIC should provide help and advice to land managers wishing to take up access options in their Land Management Contracts.

Heritage, Conservation and the Environment

Countryside access allows locals and visitors to enjoy the natural, cultural and historical heritage of the islands. It is important that development of access is not carried out at the expense of that heritage. Heavy public use of sensitive areas could cause erosion of vegetation, damage to archaeological sites and disturbance to wildlife. Construction works during the bird breeding season could cause birds to abandon their nests.

Access planning and management should conserve and, wherever possible, enhance the natural environment and our cultural heritage.

Countryside access also provides an opportunity to increase understanding and awareness of areas rich in biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Key Issues

- A need to ensure the development of access does not cause damage to the natural or cultural heritage.
- A need to raise awareness of the natural and cultural heritage where access routes are provided.

Access and Our Heritage

Next Steps

Proposal 27

To ensure development of new paths and improvements to existing routes takes into account the need to conserve the natural and cultural heritage of the area. Historic Scotland, Orkney Archaeological Trust, the County Archaeologist, SNH, RSPB, Orkney Field Club and the Orkney Biodiversity Officer should be consulted whenever appropriate.

Proposal 28

Interpretation and other information associated with countryside access should include awareness raising of our biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Maintaining the Access Infrastructure

The quality of the management and maintenance of the access infrastructure is a key issue. Poorly maintained routes will not be well used and may be unsafe for the public.

Currently most routes are inspected regularly by OIC access staff and the Ranger service on Hoy and Sanday. The majority of the path maintenance is carried out during the summer months by Special Projects and includes grass cutting, treatment of wooden infrastructure and repainting of signs. There is also an ongoing programme of repairs and improvements that are needed. On site interpretation and other information provision also needs to be maintained, upgraded and replaced.

With the continuing development of new paths and the Core Paths Network the amount of path maintenance is set to increase quite considerably. This could mean an increase in Council revenue spending on an annual basis. However, the provision of access options in Land Management Contracts is likely to lead to a number of existing and new paths being maintained by the landowners themselves in the future.

Key Issues

- The need to ensure that access routes are maintained to a high standard.
- The need to ensure that sufficient resources are available to maintain and repair access infrastructure and upgrade and renew on site interpretation and signage.

Providing Well Maintained Paths Next Steps

Proposal 29

To continue to inspect all promoted countryside access sites and core paths on a regular basis to ensure they are safe and fit for use. This will include routes maintained under Land Management Contracts.

Proposal 30

To continue to maintain and repair all OIC maintained access infrastructure and replace on site interpretation as needed

Action Areas

This section of the Strategy provides details of how countryside access will be implemented in the future. The different areas of Orkney have been grouped together under the various habitats that are found in Orkney, with the exception of the Outer Isles which have a number of unique characteristics requiring their own 'action area'.

The various Action Areas are as follows:

- A. Enclosed Farmland
- B. Coast
- C. Settlements
- D. Inland Water
- E. Areas with Natural Heritage Designations
- F. Areas with Cultural and Archaeological Designations
- G. The Orkney Hills
- H. The Outer Isles

Under each of the 'action areas' there will be:

- a description of the 'Action Area' in general and more specifically in relation to access
- a detailed look at the key issues in the 'Action Area'
- priorities for the different actions identified under each area. These priorities are based on the results of the public consultation and the audit.

Action Area A

Enclosed Farmland

Description

One of the main employers in Orkney is agriculture. Many Orkney farms are based on livestock farming. According to the Agricultural Census of June 2004 there were a total of 92,954 cattle in Orkney and 147,091 sheep. A great deal of the enclosed farmland is used for grazing of either sheep or cattle in the summer months. The enclosed areas without stock present are used to grow hay, silage or barley which is fed to the livestock in the winter months. Access to the coastline, beaches, lochs or hills will often involve going through an area of enclosed farmland.

Key Issues

The right of responsible access created by the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 includes public access over enclosed farmland. Many local land managers have expressed concerns regarding this and key issues are summarised below:

- all access users need to be fully aware of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code guidance with respect to enclosed farmland.
- the need to raise public awareness of issues of particular importance in Orkney eg fields with livestock, dogs, silage crops, gates being left open.
- the need to work with land managers to develop safe routes through fields with livestock or crops.

Access users also have problems with access over enclosed farmland. The key issues for users are:

- they are often unsure where they can safely go, without interfering with land management operations or meeting livestock.
- access over barbed wire or electric fences can be hazardous and it can be difficult to find a gate to use.
- farm gates are often difficult to open and close.

Priorities for Access over Farmland

Creating Paths

The creation of paths and path networks through enclosed farmland will help to reduce conflict between recreational access users and land management. The main priority is for the Council to work closely with land managers to select suitable routes, which will direct and manage access over enclosed land satisfactorily for all interested parties.

Encouraging Responsible Access

Responsible access over enclosed land can be encouraged by the use of good signage, information boards and leaflets. These are important tools for developing successful access management. They can be provided by Orkney Islands Council, land managers or local communities.

Designated paths should be clearly signposted at the start of the walk and waymarked as necessary. On site interpretation boards can provide guidance on access users rights and responsibilities. They can also provide information about land management needs and potential hazards or risks.

Land managers have responsibilities under the new legislation to provide information notices at entry points to fields when necessary. Providing information about land management operations will help visitors avoid conflict with farmers.

Public Rights of Way

There are currently a number of Public Rights of Way (PROWs) which go through enclosed farmland. The Council is committed to ensuring that these routes are kept open and free from obstruction. These PROWs are an important part of Orkney's access provision and are likely to form part of the Core Paths Network. The Council's priority will be to provide linkages between PROW's to create a more effective network of routes.

Providing Car parks

Creating parking areas at the start of promoted walks will help to prevent people blocking gateways with cars and causing land managers inconvenience.

Action Area B

The Coast

Description

The Orkney coastline consists of a diverse mixture of dramatic cliffs, sandy beaches and rocky shores. It provides some of Orkney's most spectacular scenery, beautiful views and important archaeology. The coastline is probably one of Orkney's greatest attractions and is a very important resource for walking.

Cliff top walks are particularly popular in Orkney, at any time of year. During the winter you can see the dramatic rough seas and huge waves breaking onto the cliffs.

In summer the cliffs are like natural skyscrapers in a huge seabird city. Narrow ledges on otherwise vertical cliff faces attract thousands of breeding seabirds.

Cliffs are often backed by maritime heath or maritime grassland – both are important natural habitats that support a rich biodiversity. Sandy links or machair is another valuable coastal habitat, colourful with wild flowers in the summer months.

Orkney has a number of lovely sandy beaches which are very popular for recreational activities such as dog walking and picnicking, as well as water based sports.

Orkney's low rocky shores are less dramatic than our cliffs but still attractive areas with abundant seals, rock pools and wading birds.

Many of Orkney's cultural sites are located along the coast and also attract a great many walkers. Sites vary from defensive brochs and hermitage sites to boat nousts and tangle dykes.

Key Issues

- fences very close to the edge of the coast can make public access difficult and unsafe.
- narrow, fenced coastal strips force access users to walk in adjacent fields which may contain livestock or crops
- walks along high cliffs may suffer from coastal erosion, landslides and cliff falls. Undermining of cliffs by the sea can result in overhangs which are not visible to walkers on the cliff top
- cliff walks may not be suitable for all user groups. Dogs and children can be particularly vulnerable.
- beaches are popular recreational sites that are often spoilt by litter and dog faeces
- popular beaches are not always accessible to less able or disabled people
- increased public access may damage natural habitats or disturb breeding birds.
- protection of coastal cultural sites from damage and erosion

Priorities for Coastal Access

Developing Coastal Paths

The development of new coastal paths is a high priority for both residents and tourists. There is a clear need for both long linear coastal walks and circular coastal walks, which are signposted and promoted.

While access to the coast needs to be formalised and made more widely available it is important that the natural vegetation of the coast is retained and the creation of hard surfaced paths is avoided.

Where fences are very close to the edge of the coast, making access difficult and dangerous, OIC should work with land managers to identify areas where fences could be moved back to create a wider coastal strip.

Some areas of coastline, including some beaches, are made inaccessible by adjacent fenced farmland. To secure access to these areas the Council needs to work with land managers to create routes across enclosed farmland to reach the coast.

Protecting the Natural Heritage

Care should be taken when developing coastal routes to conserve natural habitats and avoid disturbing sensitive breeding birds. Paths should be designed to avoid particularly sensitive areas. Consultation with SNH, RSPB and the Orkney Biodiversity Officer will identify vulnerable sites.

Protecting the Cultural Heritage

Care should also be taken to protect the cultural heritage when developing coastal routes. Historic Scotland and the Orkney Archaeological Trust should be consulted when developing paths in sensitive areas.

Improving amenity areas

Popular amenity areas, such as beaches, should be pleasant and safe for all recreational users. OIC, the public and other organisations and agencies should continue to support the annual 'Bag the Bruck'. Dog walkers should be made aware of their duty to clean up after their dogs, and dog dirt bins should be provided at key sites.

Access to beaches should be improved, where practical, so that these sites are available for less able or disabled people. Provision of parking close to the beach can make beaches more easily accessible for all users.

Action Area C

Settlements

Description

The main settlements in Orkney have their own special issues and priorities for action and have therefore have been grouped together into Action Area C.

The main settlements in Orkney are Kirkwall, Stromness, Dounby, Finstown and St Margaret's Hope. Kirkwall is by far the largest town in Orkney and according to the 2001 census had a population of 6,206, almost a third of Orkney's total population. Improving access in and around the settlements will therefore be a high priority.

Key Issues

- a need to reduce the reliance on cars for short journeys in towns. Many residents in the main settlements use cars to access services, schools, workplaces and amenity sites
- a need to improve countryside access close to settlements
- dog fouling on paths and in recreation areas.
- litter

Priorities for Access in and around Settlements

Development of Multi-User Paths

To provide good quality, safe multi-use paths, which link settlements to nearby amenity areas. For example the creation of a multi-user route from Kirkwall to Scapa Bay following the route of the burn and avoiding a busy, fast road.

Development of Local Path Networks

To increase the number of countryside walks that are located close to settlements and to develop simple path networks in and around settlements. The public consultation shows there is a high demand for circular walks which are accessible from housing areas.

Safe Routes to School

To develop further footways and cycle ways that link housing areas with schools and recreational areas.

Planning Ahead

Ensure that access forms an integral part of new development and regeneration projects. This can be achieved by the use of planning conditions and agreement to secure development and maintenance of new connections.

Action Area D

Inland Water

Description

Orkney contains large areas of inland water mainly in the form of lochs. There are a number of lochs both on the Orkney mainland and in the isles and many of these are popular with trout fishermen. There is also low level use of lochs by canoes and wind surfers. The lochs and associated wetlands are important sites for wildlife, particularly wintering and breeding birds.

Key Issues

- access to lochs is limited due to the necessity of crossing enclosed farmland to reach the lochside
- circular walks around loch shores are restricted by field fences that extend right down to the loch edge. There is often livestock in these fields which use the loch to drink from.
- loch shores are subject to fluctuating water levels, which could make developing paths difficult
- there are a limited number of launching points on the lochs. There is a demand for more to be created with good access down to these launching points.
- Orkney lochs are an extremely important habitat for wildlife, especially wintering and breeding wildfowl. Improved access to lochs may increase disturbance of wildlife.

Priorities for Access to Inland Water

Improved Lochside Access

To improve lochside access by working with relevant land managers. This will include access to the loch through enclosed farmland, as well as access around the loch itself.

Protecting Wildlife

Lochside paths and boat access should not be created where this would have a serious adverse impact on wildlife. Consultation with SNH, RSPB, Orkney Field Club and the Orkney Biodiversity Officer will identify sensitive areas. Bird hides could be provided to enable low impact wildlife observation.

Interpretation and Information

By providing good guidance and interpretation at the main entry points to the loch, access users can be informed about the biodiversity interest of the loch and made aware of the need to minimise disturbance of wildlife.

Action Area E

Areas with Natural Heritage Designations

Description

Much of Orkney's land is managed with nature conservation in mind. There currently 13 areas which are designated as Special Protected Areas (SPA), six areas designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and one Ramsar site in Orkney. These are sites of international natural heritage importance, which have been given protection under European law. There are 36 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in Orkney. These sites have been designated because *'they are 'special' for their plants, animals or habitats, their rocks or landforms, or a combination of such natural features'*. The SSSIs in Orkney make up an area of 23,644 hectares. This represents almost a quarter of the total area of Orkney.

The RSPB manage over 8,000 hectares, with most of this land designated as nature reserves. The RSPB welcomes responsible access, and through careful access management ensures that disturbance to nesting birds is minimised.

Orkney has one Local Nature Reserve, Mull Head in Deerness, owned and managed by Orkney Islands Council. Mull Head is a very popular recreational area, used by residents and tourists. There are also over 250 Local Nature Conservation Sites.

The public are understandably keen to have access to these 'special' areas and enjoy Orkney's biodiversity, but it is important that recreational access is carefully managed with the protection of these sites the main priority.

Key Issues

- damage and disturbance occurring as a result of increased access to designated sites.
- disturbance to sensitive wildlife, especially breeding birds, as a result of increased access.
- damage to sensitive natural habitats and rare plants by walkers, cyclists or horse riders. Heavy public use can lead to erosion of vegetation. Damage can be particularly severe if the ground is wet and boggy.
- dogs not kept under close control may disturb ground nesting birds and eat eggs and young chicks.

Priorities for Access to Sites of Natural Heritage Importance

Managing Access

Orkney Islands Council will work with SNH, RSPB and the Orkney Biodiversity Officer to identify and develop access routes that will provide adequate public access, while minimising disturbance to wildlife and damage to natural habitats.

Interpretation and Information

The provision of detailed guidance and interpretation at the entrance points to a nature reserve or other protected area, will raise awareness of the importance of the natural heritage and the need to conserve it. Maps showing paths should be displayed on interpretation boards or in leaflets, with the routes then clearly waymarked on the ground. These actions should help manage access and protect the most sensitive areas of the sites.

Action Area F

Areas with Cultural and Archaeological Designations

Description

Orkney has a wealth of sites of cultural heritage interest. There are a total of 330 sites which are Scheduled Ancient Monuments, ranging from prehistoric times to the 20th Century. In addition to this there are over 2000 sites listed on the Site and Monuments Record and new sites are found every year. The Heart of Neolithic Orkney is recognised as an area of international value through its designation as a World Heritage Site. It includes Skara Brae, Maeshowe, the Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brodgar, together with adjacent standing stones and burial mounds.

A number of the more important monuments are managed by Historic Scotland or the Council and some are paying facilities. However, many are unmanned and largely unsupervised sites in the wider countryside.

It is important that recreational access does not have an adverse impact on these sites, or their settings.

Key Issues

- damage to cultural sites as a result of pressure from increased recreational access
- increased erosion of coastal sites resulting from public access
- use of metal detectors
- removal of artefacts or materials from cultural sites
- lack of guidance/information on responsible access at cultural sites

Priorities for Access to Cultural Sites

Managing Access

Orkney Islands Council will work with Historic Scotland, Orkney Archaeological Trust and the County Archaeologist to identify routes which will provide adequate public access, while minimising damage to our cultural heritage.

OIC will continue to work with Historic Scotland, SNH and the RSPB on access within the World Heritage Site.

The Council will also monitor paths where increased use may cause erosion and possible damage to a site.

Education

Raising awareness of our cultural heritage will help people to enjoy cultural sites and realise the importance of conserving them. Providing information about individual sites, through leaflets and interpretation, will promote understanding and appreciation of our local history and also encourage the public to treat cultural heritage with respect.

The SOAC gives guidance on responsible behaviour at cultural sites and this information should be made widely available. It focuses on not damaging structures or features; not removing anything from the site or using metal detectors; and not lighting fires or camping on sites.

Action Area G

The Orkney Hills

Description

Orkney is generally a land of low rolling hills, mostly cultivated, with just the tops of the higher hills still covered in moorland. Only Hoy has extensive unfenced, open hill ground which is more 'Highland' in nature. The dramatic summits of Ward Hill and the Cuilags stand in sharp contrast to the gentle slopes of most of the area. The summit of Ward Hill is only 479m, but the northerly latitude and exposure to winds means the vegetation here is more reminiscent of the Cairngorms. The moorland on Hoy extends to about 9000ha, most of it protected through SPA, SAC and SSSI. The West Mainland has the second largest block of moorland, mostly lying in the parishes of Harray, Birsay and Rendall. From the hills of Harray you can look across to Rousay which has the third largest area of moorland, with hilltops rising to 250m. Other hill ground can be seen in Eday, Orphir, Stenness and on Keelylang and Wideford Hills. Nearly all Orkney's moorland clad hills are protected by natural heritage designations.

Key Issues

- moorland sites are important for wildlife and plants and increased public access may cause damage and disturbance
- the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 gives freedom of access to hill ground and access users need to be aware of their responsibilities when exercising their access right
- moorland can be at risk from campers lighting open fires which are not kept under control
- hill ground may be grazed by sheep which could be disturbed by dogs running loose
- hill ground can be hazardous for unprepared walkers - weather conditions can change rapidly, mist can roll in unexpectedly and conditions underfoot can be difficult.

Priorities for Hill Access

Protecting the Natural Heritage

As described in the Action Area E, it is important that public access is carefully managed in sensitive and vulnerable areas and people are well informed about nature conservation issues and the biodiversity of the area.

Protecting the Cultural Heritage

Many of our cultural sites occur on hill ground. Care should be taken to protect these sites by managing access in sensitive areas and raising awareness of the cultural interest.

Enjoying Wider Access

Hill ground is the one area of Orkney where access users can enjoy the freedom to roam more widely, rather than being restricted to paths. Except where there are peat tracks which can be used to create formal routes, access over hill ground can be less

managed that in other areas. There are, however, issues which may needed to be resolved by erecting waymarking to guide walkers. These include dangerous hazards and the need to protect sensitive wildlife or natural habitats.

Guidance for Access Users

Freedom of access to hills should be accompanied by clear guidance on access users responsibilities and safety. Provision of interpretation, leaflets and other information will help people to access hills safely and responsibly. Subjects covered should include protecting the natural and cultural heritage, the risk of fire, keeping dogs under control and being prepared by carrying suitable clothing, map and compass.

Action Area H

The Outer Isles

Sustaining remote communities in Orkney, particularly in the smaller isles, can only be done if they have a viable economic base. Many of the remoter communities are dependent on farming and fishing, which are undergoing rapid change and a decline in their importance. For this reason these islands are regarded as particularly fragile. One way forward for these communities is to develop sustainable tourism. Part of this is the need to develop facilities and activities on the islands that attract tourists and encourage them to stay on the isles rather than just come for a day visit.

The outer isles are mostly fairly small with extensive attractive coastlines and quiet roads which are ideal for recreational access. They have abundant wildlife and cultural sites for visitors to explore on foot or by cycle. The provision of improved outdoor access opportunities could boost tourism and aid the local economy.

Key Issues

- the need to promote sustainable tourism on the outer isles
- the need to develop outdoor access opportunities to help promote tourism

Priorities for Access on the Outer Isles

Developing Outdoor Access Opportunities

A wide range of access opportunities should be provided. The development of ‘whole island’ coastal paths is possible on the smaller islands. Coastal walks, with tracks linking to the island’s road system to create a network of routes of different lengths, would be ideal. It is also important to have paths close to the ferry terminals and airports to reduce the need for visitors to bring their cars.

Easy access should be provided to important amenity sites, such as beaches, and to sites of historical or cultural interest. The key sites on the island should be accessible for visitors of all abilities, wherever feasible and practical.

Information for Visitors

Publicity is the key to attracting tourists to the outer isles. In relation to access provision this means providing walking and cycling information in the tourist information centres, on the Visit Orkney website, at the airport and on the ferries.

Once visitors reach the isles there should be access literature available in hotels, bed and breakfasts, ferry waiting rooms, shops and other public places. On site interpretation and signage is also crucial to providing a good experience for visitors and to ensure they exercise their access rights responsibly.

The development of the Ranger service on the outer isles would provide excellent ‘on the ground’ support for visitors and the opportunity to provide guided walks, talks and activities.

Delivery Mechanisms

An essential part of the strategy is to identify the mechanisms by which Orkney Islands Council and its partners can implement the key objectives and actions highlighted in the strategy.

The core mechanisms for access development are as follows:

- Staffing provision
- Local Access Forum
- Partnership Working
- Resources
- Monitoring and evaluation

Staffing Provision

Orkney Islands Council employs an Environmental Planner and Access Officer to help develop and implement outdoor access in Orkney. The Access Officer is employed on a three year contract, part funded by Scottish Natural Heritage. The Access Officer's work focuses primarily on the development and implementation of the Core Paths Network. The Environmental Planner has a more strategic role, overseeing access development and managing Council access to the countryside budgets.

An Orkney Ranger Service is slowly being developed in the islands, largely due to the financial support of SNH. Currently there are four Rangers in Orkney, covering the islands of Hoy and Sanday and the World Heritage Site (WHS) on the mainland. Funding of the Rangers is achieved through organisations such as SNH, OIC, RSPB, Historic Scotland and Orkney Enterprise, local community groups and through external grants.

Local Access Forum

The Orkney Local Access Forum (LAF) was established in 2001. This role was taken on by an already existing group - the Orkney Countryside Committee. In order to act as the LAF the Countryside Committee was expanded to include additional groups, thus ensuring that all relevant stakeholders were included.

The role of the LAF is to assist OIC with the implementation of the new access legislation. Its core tasks are:

- To review local implementation of the new access legislation and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code
- To assist OIC in developing an access strategy, Core Paths Network and other access provision
- To work with OIC to develop local advice for the public and land managers on their responsibilities
- To act as a formal consultee on issues such as diversion and closure of paths.
- To assist with the resolution of access disputes
- To advise OIC on the implementation of its access duties

Partnership Working

It is crucial that the development of access provision is taken forward through partnership working. Countryside access is about more than providing footpaths, it also has a role in improving health, providing sustainable transport options, promoting

tourism and protecting our heritage. In view of this it is essential that a wide range of partners are involved in its development.

Partners should include agencies and organisations such as SNH, NHS, Orkney Enterprise, Historic Scotland, SEERAD, NFU, FWAG and Visit Orkney.

The Local Access Forum obviously has a key role to play, with members as wide ranging as the Orkney Ramblers, Orkney Field Club, the SWRI and the local riding clubs. There is also a clear need to draw on a wider range of stakeholders to ensure countryside access reflects the aspirations of all sectors of the community.

Working with individual land managers is essential to the production of the Core Paths Plan and to the management of access in general. Farmers should be well represented on the Local Access Forum but listened to as individuals as well.

Many communities in Orkney are already involved in access planning, development and management. This can be through groups such as Development Trusts, Tourist Associations or Community Councils. It is critical this sort of involvement is encouraged to ensure that appropriate access provision is developed.

Resources

To implement the Orkney Outdoor Access Strategy considerable funds will be required. Whilst it is difficult to quantify the full extent of the funds needed, it is clear the resource requirement will be much greater than it has been in the past.

The Scottish Executive currently provides funds to Local Authorities for outdoor access via the Grant Aided Expenditure Allocation. This funding is not ring fenced, but Local Authorities are expected to specifically apportion funds to outdoor access from this allocation.

The Resource Audit identifies a wide range of funding opportunities for outdoor access projects and lists the organisations that will fund them. Generally speaking it is easier to find funding for capital works than it is for revenue works.

An important new development is the inclusion of access options in Land Management Contracts in 2005. Farmers are now able to claim funding for undertaking maintenance of existing or new paths on their land.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Implementation of the Outdoor Access Strategy needs to be monitored and evaluated. This will ensure the aims and objectives are adhered to, progress is assessed, problems identified and rectified and any essential modifications carried out. It is recommended the strategy be reviewed every five years and that the Local Access Forum should be involved in this process.

The audit work can provide a partial baseline, against which future developments can be monitored and evaluated.

Much of the monitoring will be done by establishing a GIS database, into which data could be inputted and easily updated, to create an integrated path management system. This will make it easier to see how access in different areas is developing and being managed and how paths are linking into effective networks. It could also be used to monitor the impact of access on biodiversity. It is likely to be particularly useful for monitoring the development and implementation of the Core Paths Plan. The development and implementation of the Core Paths Plan will also be monitored by the Scottish Executive.