

The provision of access for outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland

Comments by

Northern Ireland Environment Link

29th March 2021

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the natural and built environment of Northern Ireland. Its 63 Full Members represent 190,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £70 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL brings together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields.

These comments are made on behalf of Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments further, we would be happy to do so.

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The provision of access for outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland

Key Stakeholder Consultation

27th January – 29th March 2021



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**
www.daera-ni.gov.uk

***Sustainability** at the heart of a
living, working, active landscape
valued by everyone.*

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The value of our outdoors

Northern Ireland has a mixture of extremely varied and beautiful lands and seascapes within a very small geographical area. Mountains, moorlands, forests, extensive inland waterways and a spectacular coastline all make up our local environment. Our towns and cities tend to be relatively small and therefore greenspace, such as hills, forests and parks are in close proximity to most of the people who live and work here. However, access to the natural environment is often restricted and the provision varies from area to area.

A recent survey* identified that the benefits of spending time outdoors during the COVID-19 lockdown were significant. 84% of participants reported feeling physical health benefits and 90% reported benefits related to mental health and wellbeing. Benefits were strongest amongst people who visited the outdoors most often during lockdown and people with quality trails and greenspaces close to home. 51% of respondents expected to spend more of their free time outdoors than they did pre-lockdown. People would most like to be able to visit local parks, the countryside and coast, to walk on off-road trails and to spend time with family and friends. There was significant support for the development and improvements of walking and cycling trails.

* Survey carried out by Outdoor Recreation NI in May 2020. The full report is available at <http://www.outdoorrecreationni.com/news/new-survey-highlights-importance-of-accessing-outdoors-safely-during-covid-19/>

Apart from health and well-being benefits, outdoor recreation contributes to Northern Ireland society in a wide range of areas, including social inclusion, community cohesion, environmental awareness, rural development and economic opportunities.

However, our natural environment is also a living, working and active environment with the majority of the land farmed and producing our food, drinking water and supporting livelihoods.

The development of the Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for Northern Ireland ([Our-Great-Outdoors-The-Outdoor-Recreation-Action-Plan-for-Northern-Ireland_SportNI-2014.pdf](#) ([outdoorrecreationni.com](http://www.outdoorrecreationni.com))) identified a need to review and initiate the development and consolidation of appropriate outdoor recreation legislation.

It is important that a suitable balance is struck between enabling public access to our natural environment, while protecting that environment and ensuring landowners rights.

1.2 Accessibility

Public access to land in Northern Ireland is more restricted than other parts of the United Kingdom. Land ownership in Northern Ireland is significantly different from the rest of the United Kingdom as most farms are of a much smaller scale, with a proportionately higher number of the population with land owning interests.

Although some areas of the countryside may have been used freely for recreation for many years, the public have no general rights to wander over open land, mountains, moorland, woodlands,

the foreshore, etc. However, many landowners tolerate access to their land without a formalised agreement.

Generally speaking, in Northern Ireland, **public access is restricted to:**

a) Public Rights of Way;

A Public Right of Way is “a highway which any member of the public may use as a right - not a privilege granted by the landowner”. It is a permanent legal entity and remains in existence until it is extinguished, or diverted, by due legal process. Detail on Public Rights of Way is available on NI Direct at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/public-rights-way>

b) where the public have the landowner’s permission to visit;

Local councils may make Permissive Path Agreements with landowners for people to use an agreed portion of their land, under agreed conditions, as a means to secure quality recreational access.

c) areas of land which are in public ownership and to which the public are invited to use;

Northern Ireland’s public land comprises of just over 6% of the total land area. This includes public land managed by:

- Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), including;
 - Forest Service
 - NI Environment Agency (country parks, nature reserves etc.)
- Department for Communities (DfC)
- District Councils
- Loughs Agency
- Northern Ireland Water
- Waterways Ireland

Note: Permitted access to public land does not necessarily create a Public Right of Way.

2.0 Aim of this consultation

The aim of this consultation is to seek the views of key stakeholders on the current provision members of the public have to Northern Ireland’s natural environment for outdoor recreation, and investigate how provision can be improved, while protecting the environment and recognising the needs of landowners. **This consultation is not considering an overall “Right to Roam”, or the development of National Parks in Northern Ireland.**

Stakeholders identified for initial consultation include:

- Representative groups of those who use the outdoors for recreational purposes
- Representative groups of landowners / land managers
- Environmental groups

- Those who enforce related legislation

A list of Key Stakeholders who have been invited to provide their views is provided at Annex A. If you feel we have omitted any significant group please contact us at the e-mail / address below.

A broader public consultation is expected following the consideration of responses from key stakeholders.

Submissions should be:

e-mailed (preferable) to: AccessforOutdoorRecreation@daera-ni.gov.uk

or

hard copies sent to: Stephen Emerson
RNRPD: Natural Heritage Policy Branch
Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs
Klondyke Building
Cromac Avenue
Belfast BT7 2JA

The closing date for submissions is **29th March 2021**

3.0 Alternative Formats

On request, we can arrange to provide other formats of the documents above, such as -

- Paper Copy
- Large Print
- Braille
- Other languages

To request an alternative format, please contact us by one of the following methods:

e-mail (preferable): AccessforOutdoorRecreation@daera-ni.gov.uk

Write to: Stephen Emerson
RNRPD: Natural Heritage Policy Branch
Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs
Klondyke Building
Cromac Avenue
Belfast BT7 2JA

Telephone: 028 9056 9432

Text Relay: If you have a hearing difficulty you can contact the Department via:

- Text Relay using the Next Generation Text Service (NGTS).
- Making a call from a textphone dial 18001 + number.
- Making a call from a telephone dial 18002 + number.

4.0 Your details:

We use this information in order to communicate with you if we need to clarify your response or for further communications.

Title (e.g. Mr, Mrs, Ms etc.)	Mr
Forename or initials	Connor
Surname	McLean
Full postal address	Northern Ireland Environment Link, 89 Loopland Drive, Belfast
Postcode	BT6 9DW
Email address	connor@nienvironmentlink.org

Are you responding as an:

a) Individual YES / NO

If "YES", do you:

- Participate in outdoor recreational activities? YES / NO

Please identify which _____

- Own, or manage, land which the public may wish to use to facilitate outdoor recreation? YES / NO

Provide details (if relevant) _____

- Other (please state) _____

b) Organisation / Group YES / NO

If "YES", does your organisation / group :

- Participate in, or organise, outdoor recreational activities? YES / NO

Please identify which activities _____

- Own, or manage, land which the public may wish to use for outdoor recreation? YES / NO
Please identify the type of land (eg mountain, lowland farmland, woodland etc.) _____

- Other (please state) **Environmental NGO - Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for organisations interested in the natural and built environment of Northern Ireland.** _____

Organisation / Group Details:

- Organisation/Group name Northern Ireland Environment Link
- Full postal address 89 Loopland Drive, Belfast
- Postcode BT6 9DW
- Contact name Connor McLean
- Contact email connor@nienvironmentlink.org

- Which category best describes your organisation (select one item)
 - Community organisation
 - Third sector / equality organisation
 - Landowner / land manager
 - Private sector organisation
 - Representative body for professionals
 - Local government
 - Community Planning Partnership
 - Public Body, including Executive Agencies, NDPBs, NHS etc.
 - Academic or Research Institute
 - Other (please state) _____

Publication of responses - your permissions:

We may wish to publish responses to this consultation, in summary and where possible in detail.
We would like your permission to publish your response:

Please select one item (Required)

- Publish this response with your name

- Publish this response without your name
- Do not publish this response

Note that when we publish reports on a consultation, we do not publish your email or postal address or other information about you.

We may share your response internally with other Northern Ireland Government policy teams who may be addressing the issues you discuss. They may wish to contact you. Are you content for Northern Ireland Government to contact you in relation to this consultation exercise?

Please select (Required)

Yes No

5.0 Consultation:

You are invited to respond to whichever of the following questions are relevant to you, or those who you represent. However, you should not feel obliged to respond to questions which are not.

Do not feel limited to the space provided. Please feel free to expand the comments boxes or attach additional pages if required.

PLEASE NOTE: This consultation is not reviewing specific sports in Northern Ireland, it is specifically looking at the provision of access to the countryside to partake in outdoor activities.

5.1 Current Provision

Q1: Do you believe there is sufficient public access to the natural environment for outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland?

YES / NO

Our outdoors, including green and blue spaces in urban, semi urban and rural areas, provide opportunities for outdoor recreation that are of immense importance to our society. Such places enable people to engage with nature in ways which are vital to our physical and mental well-being. Studies supported by Sport NI show that we all benefit from regular exercise in the outdoor environment. Furthermore, our understanding and respect for nature increases the more access we have to natural areas and green/blue spaces.

Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the UK in the quantity and quality of access its citizens have to the outdoors. This situation has not benefitted from access legislation which is considered outdated and unfit for purpose. The last review of access legislation took place in 1999 and saw no material change – unlike in England and Wales where the Countryside Rights of Way Act (2000) and the Land Reform Act in Scotland (2003) have led to significant increased access.

Never before in Northern Ireland has the demand for high quality access been so apparent. COVID-19 has brought with it an increased demand for outdoor places – this has been evident

in numbers visiting sites such as the Mournes, Ness Wood, Divis Mountain, Cuilcagh in Fermanagh and the cycle trails in Rostrevor Forest. A recent survey by Outdoor Recreation NI (ORNI) has shown that there has been an increased appreciation of the outdoors as a result of the lockdown. 63% reported going outdoors for exercise every day during lockdown, a much higher proportion than the 28% reported in the 2017/18 Continuous Household Survey. A considerable effort will be required to meet the increase in demand – according to ORNI¹, a lack of access to local trails and greenspace is considered to be a major obstacle to participation in outdoor recreation. Nearly 1 in 3 state they do not have greenspace within easy walking distance of their home.

NIEL welcomes the funding that has been provided to support NGOs which manage our outdoor sites throughout the pandemic. This continued support will be of particular importance as we begin to reopen and encourage local tourism and “staycations” to our country parks, natural and historic sites. In addition, government bodies should provide advice and assistance to councils, landowners, NGOs and others with a responsibility for managing outdoor spaces as and when coronavirus guidance and/or restrictions are updated. One of the most important challenges that we now face in Northern Ireland is how to reopen in a safe and managed way; and to encourage increased uptake in outdoor recreation for the benefit of our physical health and mental wellbeing.

We believe that the increased health consciousness and renewed appreciation for the outdoors will enable central and local government (with strong public support) to progress and provide funding for a range of ambitious actions which will improve opportunities for outdoor recreation throughout Northern Ireland.

Q2: Do you feel that Public Rights of Way are adequately identified to the public?

YES / NO

Please feel free to comment below

Within The Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983, it is written that:

“A district council shall compile and preserve maps and other records of public rights of way in its district.”

It has not been possible to find any such maps online, with the majority of the council websites returning no results for “Public Rights of Way” search queries.

In response to a 2017 FOI request for a map of public rights of way within the Causeway Coast and Glens District, the council refused, stating:

¹ <http://www.outdoorrecreationni.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/People-Nature-and-Health-NI-March-2021.pdf>

“there is no duty for Council to compile an overall map of the district which shows all the public rights of way”².

In their response to the FOI request, the council stated that a map would eventually be made public, however, this map is still not available four years later.

A duty should be placed upon local councils to complete public rights of way maps and make them freely available online. These maps are of significant public interest and could be used to develop new and existing trails and help create opportunities for outdoor recreation.

Primarily for land owners/managers (however views are welcome from all participants):

Q3: What difficulties have you encountered, or do you foresee, in establishing or managing public access through your land, or the land you manage?

Forests, parks and greenspace which have successfully re-opened after coronavirus lockdown are experiencing very significant demand and user numbers. Along with the impact of reduced income for some landowners and land managers this is posing an unprecedented challenge in terms of facilitating people availing of the many benefits of outdoor recreation. As outdoor recreation has grown year-on-year, infrastructure and services have struggled to keep pace – even before the increase in activity due to COVID-19.

Key management issues may include:

- Number of visitors exceeding site capacity
- Littering and the associated health and environmental risks (e.g. broken bottles, aluminium cans, plastic waste)
- Fire risk – open air fires and BBQs being used where there is no provision
- Dog fouling and inappropriate disposal of dog waste
- Dogs off lead worrying farm animals
- Unpermitted wild camping

Primarily for land owners/managers (however views are welcome from all participants):

Q4: What would encourage you to agree to public access through your land, or the land you manage, for recreational purposes?

The following may encourage landowners/managers to agree to public access:

- Financial incentive through agricultural support payments
- Council advice and support, with a clear explanation of the council and landowner's role, duty of care, liabilities etc if public access is established
- Government indemnification for private landowners against liability claims from recreational users
- DfI/Council maintenance and repair of adjoining roads and trails
- The installation of signage and trail markers to better manage visitors and prevent trespass
- Designated car parking provision to help prevent congestion, illegal parking, blocking of gates etc.
- Funding to repair boundary walls, fences, gates and hedges
- Enforcement action to deter antisocial behaviour, littering, dog fouling, wild camping – this will be of particular importance following lockdown and during the summer months

In addition, and where appropriate, landowners could be made aware of the following voluntary engagement actions and asked if they would be interested in participating:

- Local recreation or community trail projects, including attendance at site visits to other locations and meetings with Farmers' Liaison Officer, Council Recreation Officer and recreational users.
- Face-to-face engagement with recreational users, including sharing local knowledge, advice on best routes, hazards, weather etc. Engagement in additional knowledge transfer actions related to recreation activity.
- Hosting site visits or leading heritage walks for local walking clubs, tourist groups, schools etc.
- Outreach activities such as talks for local walking clubs or other groups, speaking at regional or national conferences etc.
- Hosting site visits for landowners from the local area or visits to other outdoor recreation sites.
- Working with cartographers, local historians, walking guide authors etc (landowners could provide information on features on the area, place names, information on farming activity, local history etc).
- Keeping watch for potential wildlife and environmental crime and liaising with NIEA or other appropriate bodies.
- Undertaking training e.g. mountain skills training, path maintenance training, invasive species training etc.

Possible additional voluntary physical actions include:

- Provision and maintenance of parking for recreational users – could be an improved layby or other hard-standing.
- Where appropriate, development and maintenance of visitor infrastructure e.g. restrooms for those availing of parking or an outside tap (to fill bottles or to wash footwear or equipment).
- Maintenance of an agreed access route (including cutting back vegetation to keep route passable, minor works to prevent muddy path surface by diverting water off path, litter removal).
- Demarcation of an agreed access route by hedge-planting.
- Native tree planting.
- Removal of invasive species*.
- Construction and maintenance of stiles*.
- Water management – construction of waterbars, side-drains etc to prevent water damage on paths*.
- Routine maintenance and repair of upland paths* (Note: the repair/path building work itself would in most situations be beyond the scope of a voluntary scheme, due to the extent and type of work involved, however, interested local farmers/land owners could be trained and paid to carry out path maintenance. All upland path repair/construction work should be carried out in accordance with the Helping the Hills Guiding Principles.

*These measures should be conditional on participation in relevant training.

It should also be noted that a number of the above physical actions (e.g. restrooms, stile construction, hedge-planting) include both development and maintenance and also require a materials budget.

Public Land

Northern Ireland's public land comprises of just over 6% of the total land area. This includes public land managed by:

- Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), including;
 - Forest Service
 - NI Environment Agency (country parks, nature reserves etc.)
- Department for Communities (DfC)
- District Councils
- Loughs Agency
- Northern Ireland Water
- Waterways Ireland

Q5: Do you believe that an adequate amount of public land is available for outdoor recreational purposes?

YES / NO

Public land could hold considerable potential for the development of outdoor recreation opportunities. However, having only 6% of the total land mass within the public estate (as referenced above) is very low.

Whilst the Forestry Act (NI) 2010 permits public access to forests, these rights are not extended to all publicly owned land. NIEL would like to see a statutory right of access to all public land within new access legislation. Whilst exemptions may be required at some sites (for safety, security or environmental reasons), public access to public land should be presumed as the default position.

NI Water is one of the largest landowners in Northern Ireland, managing approximately 8,600 hectares of public land. A significant proportion of NI Water land has recreational value and is regularly accessed by members of the public. NIEL would welcome the ongoing maintenance of existing trails on NI Water land, as well as investment in the creation of new walking trails where appropriate.

Government departments, local councils and public agencies should seek to manage and develop outdoor recreation provision on publicly owned land in co-operation with NGOs (e.g. Outdoor Recreation NI). Public right of way should be clearly delineated at these sites, with consideration given to how access can be maintained should any public land be sold or made available through community asset transfer.

As with public rights of way maps, publicly owned land should be clearly documented online. Currently, only Department for Communities land is listed on the OpenDataNI portal with the map reporting an error message³ at the time of writing. It would be beneficial for all government departments and public agencies to list their assets online so that a more strategic approach to outdoor recreation could be progressed.

Beyond publicly owned land, there is currently no “Right to Roam” in Northern Ireland, therefore, co-operation and consent must be sought from local landowners in order to provide outdoor recreation opportunities throughout NI.

³ <https://www.opendatani.gov.uk/dataset/public-land-and-property-assets-jan-2020/resource/8d0861f3-76b4-47b5-a274-ffc38febbff7>

Q6: How could existing public land be better used in relation to outdoor recreation?

- Improved signage and trail markers
- Improved visitor infrastructure and increased capacity
- The creation of green and blue spaces and trails which cater to a broad range of ages, abilities and interests
- Increasing the total area of publicly accessible green/blue space and ways – this should be measured by council area to identify where provision is needed and where existing networks and green spaces can be connected.
- Improved communication and working arrangements between Departments, councils and public bodies managing sites with outdoor recreation value. This is of particular importance where sites adjoin one another or are in close proximity. Consideration should be given to the creation of AONB or council masterplans to help unlock the potential of these sites.

Primarily for public land managers (however views are welcome from all participants):

Q7: What difficulties have you encountered, or do you foresee, permitting public access to the land you manage where access does not currently exist or where increased access is sought?

Permitting greater public access to public lands will likely result in increased use of public land for recreation, leading to:

- An increased recognition by the public that accessible, high quality recreational experiences should not be the exception and thus greater pressure will be applied to public land managers to deliver.
- A need for public land managers to deploy knowledge and skill based solutions that they currently do not have access to.
- A need for budgets to be realigned to appropriately resource the infrastructure and labour needs to be met.

Primarily for public land managers (however views are welcome from all participants):

Q8: How could any difficulties identified in Q7 be reduced or negated?

- Public land managers should be obliged to prepare Outdoor Recreation plans for their land and water assets.
- A cross-cutting Outdoor Recreation Unit to technically support the production and delivery of outdoor recreation plans which are linked to the NI Outdoor Recreation Strategy and aligned with other relevant government strategies.
- Further support for the cross-cutting Statutory Outdoor Recreation Group.
- Better use of support networks such as the Visitor Safety Group.
- Mechanisms to allow resources such as skilled labour and equipment to be shared across public land managers.
- A recognition of outcomes-based budgeting which would allow the economic benefits emanating from increased outdoor recreation to be accounted for.

Implementing solutions such as those above may require a change in structures as well as prescription from the Executive. These should be considered and enabled as part of an Outdoor Recreation Bill.

5.2 Current Legislation

The **Guide to Public Rights of Way and Access to the Countryside: Guidance Notes on the Law, Practices and Procedures in Northern Ireland** is a practical manual, produced by the Environment & Heritage Service (now the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs), which aims to clarify the legal position in Northern Ireland, and the practice and procedures that should be followed.

The principle legislation relating to access to the countryside in Northern Ireland is **The Access to the Countryside (NI) Order 1983** (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1983/1895/data.pdf>) which deals with public rights of way and access to open country. It also identifies responsibilities on local councils and landowners.

The Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1985/170>) gives the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs powers to undertake a variety of roles for the enjoyment and conservation of the countryside and amenity lands.

The Recreation and Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1986/2232>) has been used by local councils to make

Permissive Path Agreements with landowners for people to use an agreed portion of their land as a means to secure quality recreational access. A permissive path agreement can operate under limitations and can endure for whatever period of time the council and landowner are willing to agree. It does not create a new public right of way (where one did not already exist), but a route which the landowner has given permission for people to use.

Questions 9 - 11 are aimed that those who have had cause to refer to legislation in relation to access issues, however views are welcome from all participants.

Q9: How often would you refer to legislation in relation to access issues?

- Daily / Weekly
- Monthly
- Yearly
- Rarely
- Never

Please feel free to comment below

The Access to the Countryside (NI) Order 1983 as referred to above as the “principle legislation on access to the countryside” is almost 40 years old and is long overdue for replacement. NIEL endorses calls from NORF, Outdoor Recreation NI and others for a new Outdoor Recreation Bill to replace the Access to the Countryside Order 1983.

Q10: Please identify any difficulties you have with current legislation and/or Guidance in relation to public access.
Please be as specific as you can and identify which legislation and section you are referring to.

N/A

Q11: How could the issues raised in Q10 be resolved?
Please be as specific as you can and identify which legislation and section you are referring to.

N/A

5.3 Opportunities

Q12: How could the provision of access to the outdoors for recreational purposes be improved?

NIEL endorses calls from NORF, Outdoor Recreation NI and others for a new Outdoor Recreation Bill to replace the Access to the Countryside Order 1983.

The new Outdoor Recreation Bill should include the following:

1. Introductory statement on the primary purpose of the Bill - provide for informal, outdoor recreational activities and the enjoyment of the countryside.
2. Provision of access on private land should be underpinned by responsible behaviour from users.
3. A statutory right of access on publicly owned land apart from exemptions for operational, public safety and security reasons.
4. A requirement for Councils to produce a Community Trail Plan which on the ground will result in a network of community trails that provide for the needs of walkers, horse riders, cyclists and those seeking access to water for recreation.
5. Relevant clauses enabling Councils to enter into permissive path agreements (currently under Recreation & Youth Services Order, 1986) and, in exceptional circumstances for paths identified in community trail networks, public path creation orders (currently in the Access to the Countryside Order 1983).
6. A provision for Councils to make agreements covering areas of open country (currently in the Access Order 1983), recognising a desire for free movement on the hills.
7. Provision for the assertion, protection and maintenance of PROW (currently in the Access to the Countryside Order 1983) including a new dispute resolution mechanism that avoids costly court cases to Councils.
8. Clarification on the duty of care owed by landowners and occupiers to those who use their land for recreational purposes (amending Clause 52 in the 1983 Access to the Countryside Order and the related Occupiers' Liability Act legislation) – 'recreational user category'.

What have other jurisdictions done to improve access for outdoor recreation?

Legislative changes in Great Britain over the past 20 years have increased the availability of access to the natural environment significantly. Under the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000, especially since 2005 people across England and Wales have the freedom to access land, without having to stay on designated paths. Approximately 8% of England and 20% of Wales is classed as 'access land'. In Scotland the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 established a right of non- motorised access over most land and inland water.

The provision of a "Right to Roam", and the development of National Parks has previously been considered in Northern Ireland and is not being considered as part of this consultation.

However some aspects of Scotland's Land Reform Act 2003 may provide the basis for improvement in Northern Ireland.

As a requirement of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, core path plans are drawn up by local authorities after consultation with communities, land managers and path users. **Core path networks** are interlinking routes that normally join, or are close to, communities. They are normally part of the wider path network of long distance walking and cycling routes, and local and community paths. Many Northern Ireland local councils have included the development of path networks in their current Community Plans.

Q13: Do you believe that a Core Path Network would be a possible solution to improving access for outdoor recreation?

YES / NO

Please feel free to comment below

Councils should be required to identify and establish a network of trails within their District. These networks should be made easily accessible online with information on distance, duration and intensity for those making planned visits. These routes should be quality experiences and should be made legible through use of signage, map boards, way markers and interpretation panels detailing the historical, natural, cultural significance of the sites etc. Trails should be designed to meet the needs of a broad range of users. Councils should seek to work with NGOs and local community groups in the development of these networks so that need is identified from the perspective of the users.

Q14: What would be the potential opportunities, benefits, or uses, of a Core Path Network in Northern Ireland?

We would suggest renaming “core path networks” to “community trail networks” to better reflect the bottom up approach to development.

- Increased appreciation for the natural environment – those who frequently spend time outdoors are more likely to foster a desire to protect the environment. The process of developing community trail networks and their use will provide much needed opportunities to engage with communities, enabling better understanding of our natural spaces and encouraging care for our environment.
- Encouraging active travel – this will lead to a reduction in the number of cars on our roads, thereby reducing transport emissions and improving air quality.
- The cost of the NHS is increasing year-on-year, with the Department of Health accounting for 44% of the NI Executive budget in 2019. By developing community trails and promoting outdoor recreation as a preventative medicine, we may be able to reduce the burden placed on the health service.
- Developing community trails will help promote walking and wheeling which is the most accessible form of exercise – it is a low cost activity and is suitable for all ages and abilities.
- Experiencing biodiversity is one of the demonstrable health giving benefits of outdoor recreation. As mentioned above, more people accessing the outdoors can give rise to greater appreciation and public awareness of the need to protect biodiversity. Good outdoor recreation services and access infrastructure can protect and enhance biodiversity where unmanaged access is currently contributing to environmental degradation.

Q15: What difficulties do you foresee in establishing a Core Path Network in Northern Ireland?

As discussed in Q2 & Q5, there appear to be some information gaps which could stifle ambitions to create a network of trails – neither PROW maps or maps detailing publicly owned land are readily available online.

Due to Northern Ireland’s pattern of land ownership and the absence of a “Right to Roam”, it is likely that private landowners will need to be positively engaged in the creation of these networks. Councils should be seen to work with, not against landowners. Asserting access against the will of a landowner should be a last resort and should follow careful consideration of landowner concerns and negotiations.

A process of trail co-design between councils, landowners, local community groups and NGOs working within the outdoor recreation sector will be key to the success of these networks.

Q16: How could landowners be encouraged to provide access, through their land, to develop a Core Path Network?

See answer to Q4.

Q17: What features would you like to see in a Core Path Network? (e.g. cycle lanes, circular routes etc.)

- Trail networks designed to accommodate walking, wheeling and cycling
- Design proposals should be sympathetic to the natural environment
- Multiple points of entry – these should be clearly signposted
- Circular routes (where possible)
- Connectivity with existing blue and green infrastructure
- Connectivity with public transport
- Interpretation panels, signage, trail markers etc
- An online map of the network

Q18: What other opportunities, in relation to the provision access for outdoor recreation, should be considered?

Whilst a significant portion of this consultation has been devoted to linear land access, it is vital that provision of 'spatial' high quality outdoor recreational experiences across larger areas of open countryside and outdoor recreation opportunities on water are included in the further consideration of the way forward.

Consideration could also be given to how large contiguous areas of landscape e.g. Lough Neagh, Mourne SAC could become Outdoor Recreation Areas, within which recreational use would be considered on a whole area basis and where land managers would have access to more specific and tailored supports akin to the Group EFS schemes or catchment area management schemes for water.

5.4 Miscellaneous

Q19: Please feel free to provide further views on any aspect of the provision of access for outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland

It would seem logical and necessary at this stage to include recreation as a recognised land use within the frameworks of Natural Capital and Public Goods. Under the current Agri-Environment Scheme, private landowners who give up for example, a strip of land to provide a walking trail, lose their Single Farm Payment subsidy for the area taken out of grazing. Many private landowners would be willing to grant access if this was not the case.

NIEL welcome this key stakeholder engagement and fully support the Department's commitment to developing a holistic review of the structures and legislation required to enable the provision of high quality outdoor recreation experiences in Northern Ireland.

NIEL recognises the time and reflection needed before a wider public engagement stage, and encourages the Department to continue its fruitful engagement with NIEL and other key stakeholders when drafting the wider consultation document.

Submissions should be e-mailed (preferable) to: AccessforOutdoorRecreation@daera-ni.gov.uk

or hard copies sent to:

Stephen Emerson
RNRPD: Natural Heritage Policy Branch
Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs
Klondyke Building
Cromac Avenue
Belfast BT7 2JA

The closing date for submissions is **29th March 2021**

List of Groups invited to participate in “The provision of access for outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland - Key Stakeholder Consultation”

If you feel we have omitted any significant group please contact us at
AccessforOutdoorRecreation@daera-ni.gov.uk

Angling NI
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council (Countryside Officers)
Ards and North Down Borough Council (Countryside Officers)
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council (Countryside Officers)
Belfast City Council (Countryside Officers)
Belfast Hills Partnership Recreation Group
British Horse Society
Canoeing Association of Northern Ireland
Causeway Coast Adventure Racing (CCAR)
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council (Countryside Officers)
Causeway Coast and Glens Outdoor Recreation Forum
Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside
Cycling Ulster
Derry City & Strabane District Council (Countryside Officers)
Disability Action NI
Disability Sport NI
Fermanagh & Omagh District Council (Countryside Officers)
Horse Sport Ireland
Irish Kite Surfing Association
Irish Water Ski Federation
Leave No Trace Ireland
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council (Countryside Officers)
Local Rural Support Networks
LVRP recreation forum
Marble Arch Caves UNESCO Global Geopark
MENCAP
Mid and East Antrim Council (Countryside Officers)
Mid Ulster District Council (Countryside Officers)
Mountaineering Ireland
Mourne Outdoor Recreation Forum
National Outdoor Recreation Forum (NORF)
National Trust Northern Ireland
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council (Countryside Officers)
NI Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA)

NI Association for Mental Health (Niamh)
NI Environment Link
NI Greenways
NI Heritage Fund
NI Mountain Bike Alliance
NI Protected Area Network
NI Rural Women's Network
Northern Ireland Archery Society
Northern Ireland Federation of Sub Aqua Clubs
Northern Ireland Orienteering Association
Northern Ireland Sports Forum
Northern Ireland Surfing Association
Outdoor Industry Association (NI)
Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI)
Ring of Gullion Outdoor Recreation Forum
Royal Yachting Association (NIC)
Rural Action
Rural Community Network
Speleological Union of Ireland
Sperrins Outdoor Recreation Forum
Sport Northern Ireland
Strangford Lough and Lecale Outdoor Recreation Forum
Sustrans
Triathlon Ulster
Ulster Branch, Irish Amateur Rowing Union
Ulster Farmers Union (UFU)
Ulster Federation of Rambling Clubs
Ulster Gliding Club
Ulster Hang Gliding and Paragliding Club
Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster