

## ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT TEAM OUTDOOR ACCESS STRATEGY ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20

### 1 Aim 1 - Promotion of Outdoor Access

- 1.1 To help promote understanding and enjoyment of the natural environment and outdoor access to everyone, and to ensure it is at the heart of the community wellbeing, economic development and sense of place.
- 1.2 Part of the Team's work is ensuring visitors and residents are provided with up to date information regarding access rights and responsibilities and ensuring that key information in relation to access provision in Aberdeenshire is easily and readily available. The "Paths and Outdoor Access" web pages are increasingly well used, with 17,195 views. Further improvements are planned during 2020/21 to streamline content and enhance usability for key documents.
- 1.3 Core paths provide a framework of key paths which meet community needs and at the same time minimise any potential conflict with land management. Amendments and additions to the Aberdeenshire Core Path Plan will be made during 2020/21 to keep the Plan up to date and relevant to reflect changing conditions on the ground. As part of promoting Aberdeenshire's core paths, 628 metres of core paths were signposted during the year. The reduced meterage of new core path signage was due to landowner consent being more challenging than originally anticipated, absence of key staff members and a focus on the delivery of large-scale path upgrades. Further core paths will be signposted during 2020/21 as part of an ongoing rolling programme.
- 1.4 The Environment Team attended 5 public sessions to promote responsible access. The Turriff Show and the Royal Northern Spring Show were a focus of promotional and public engagement work delivered in partnership with Aberdeenshire Local Outdoor Access Forum (ALOAF).

<b><i>Maintain and improve Outdoor Access Page</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Number of views of outdoor access webpage	17,915	8,043
<b><i>Ensure the Core Path Plan continues to be relevant and up to date</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Up to date Core Path Plan	Updates and amendments to commence in year 3 of Strategy	Updates and amendments to commence in year 3 of Strategy

<b><i>Progress signage of core path network</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Length of core path signed	628 metres	2,700 metres
<b><i>Work with internal partners, external bodies and interested groups in promoting responsible outdoor access</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Number of public sessions attended	5	6

## **2 Aim 2 – Ensure Development Protects and Enhances Outdoor Access Provision**

### **2.1 Provide advice, support and expertise to ensure that outdoor access is protected and enhanced in line with national and local policies.**

2.2 The Environment Team have continued to assist preparation work for the next Local Development Plan in terms of assessing bid sites for their potential impact and opportunities in relation to access, totalling eleven feedback sessions or responses.

2.3 During the course of the year the Environment Team provided 564 informal natural heritage advice consultation responses, involving screening for potential access issues, to Development Management through weekly/fortnightly surgeries. This increase in informal consultations consequently reduced the number of formal consultations. Forty-three formal written consultation responses relating to larger and more complex applications were provided. The introduction of improved monitoring processes and the change of emphasis to provide informal consultations has considerably improved response times.

2.4 There was no specific demand or need for the delivery of a training session for Development Management staff relating to access issues. This will be monitored during 2020/21 with the option of delivering a future tailored session based on emerging needs.

2.5 Fifty-eight consultation responses, involving screening for access issues, were undertaken in relation to Forestry Plans and Forestry Applications. Due to external agri-environment funding changes, there were no consultation responses requested.

<b><i>Provide input to national policy guidance and development</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Number of national consultations responded to	1	0

<b><i>Provide input to Local Development Plan process</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Input into Local Development Plan process	11 feedback sessions or responses with Local Development Plan Team	Ongoing feedback sessions with Local Development Plan Team
<b><i>Provide consultation advice and support to the Development Management process</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Total number of informal surgery responses	564	461
Total number of formal consultation responses	43	57
Percentage of formal consultations to planning applications responded to within 14 days	79%	53.5%
Number of Development Management training days supported	0	1
Number of Development Management meetings attended	0	6
<b><i>Consultation advice and support for forestry applications</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Number of forestry consultations	58	80
<b><i>Consultation advice and support for agri-environment applications</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Number of agri-environment consultations	0	9

### **3 Aim 3 – Upholding Access Rights**

**3.1 To ensure that the Council is delivering its duties in relation to the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 and Countryside (Scotland) Act 1967 legislation.**

**3.2** The Environment Team play a key role in ensuring that the access rights of the public and the landowner are protected and that access rights are applied

responsibly. In addition to general access enquiries, the team dealt with 67 specific upholding access rights cases. Access cases by their nature can be complicated and an amicable solution is sought wherever possible. Where an amicable solution is not possible, as a last resort, a formal Notice is served on the owner. One formal Notice was served during the year which resolved the situation. Work is ongoing to improve the process for how access cases are managed by access staff.

- 3.3 The Environment Team are assisting and supporting ALOAF, through training and capacity building, to maximise the potential of the Forum as an independent, expert and trusted organisation, to providing a source of advice on outdoor access matters throughout Aberdeenshire.

<b><i>Upholding access rights</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Number of access cases	67	57
Number of formal Notices served on owners of land to uphold access rights (Section 14's)	1	1
<b><i>Facilitate legitimate short-term public access restrictions</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Number of temporary access rights suspensions (Section 11 Orders)	2	3
<b><i>Ensure proper process is in place relating to Council responsibilities in upholding access rights</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Complete best practice guidance notes on upholding access rights	3 new guidance notes prepared	Ongoing
<b><i>Support Local Access Forum in advising on outdoor access matters throughout Aberdeenshire as appropriate</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Number of access issues consulted	4	2

#### **4 Aim 4 – Effective Management of Outdoor Access Infrastructure**

- 4.1 **To ensure there is a robust process and adequate funding in place for management and maintenance of outdoor access infrastructure which the Environment Team manages.**

- 4.2 The Environment Team has responsibility for numerous paths and associated infrastructure throughout Aberdeenshire. During 2019/20 the Environment Team managed £250,366 of access expenditure, upgrading 4,605 metres of core path and successfully bringing in £81,582 of external grant funding, to ensure that the Council's non-motorised paths, bridges and associated infrastructure were fit for purpose. Works were undertaken on the Deeside

Way; Gordon Way; the Formartine and Buchan Way; Turriff Haughs underpass; Waters of Philorth Boardwalk; Back Green Car Park, Portsoy; Aikey Brae Path; Drinnies Car Park; Back Green Car Park, Portsoy; and Muchalls to Newtonhill Path.

- 4.3 Progress on the Access Asset – Inspection and Monitoring Project, which will deliver an integrated access asset management system with other parts of Infrastructure Services, progressed well with 90% of all Planning and Environment bridges being inspected in year one. Path inspections will commence in 2020/21. Upon completion, the project will deliver an integrated asset management system, similar to the one used by Landscape Services and Structures teams, to assist in the identification, management and monitoring of Environment Team paths, bridges and associated infrastructure.
- 4.4 A Community Path Information Pack, to provide support and guidance for community access groups, was developed and promoted. 2,296 volunteer hours were delivered on path maintenance and upgrades.

<b><i>Implement a paths management and maintenance process</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Length of core path upgraded	4,605 metres	3,298 metres
Money spent on core path maintenance and enhancement	£250,366	£178,220
External grant funding secured	£81,582	£0
<b><i>Establish a robust monitoring and inspection regime for paths and access related assets</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Percentage of Environment Team bridges routinely inspected as part of an inspection programme	90%	To be implemented in years 2&3 of Strategy
Percentage of Environment Team paths routinely inspected as part of an inspection programme	To be implemented in year 3 of Strategy	To be implemented in year 3 of Strategy
<b><i>Develop a volunteer policy and procedures to increase volunteering</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Development of Community Path Information Pack	Completed	Ongoing
Volunteer hours spent on path maintenance	2,296 hours	953 hours

## **5 Aim 5 – Sustainable and Innovative Path Provision**

- 5.1 To enable the continued development of path provision throughout Aberdeenshire without increasing the management and maintenance burden on the Council.**
- 5.2 The Environment Team seeks to deliver an efficient and innovative approach to outdoor access through supporting alternative models of path maintenance and path delivery without increasing the burden on the Council. There has been increasing support provided by the Environment Team to existing and emerging community path groups to improve access provision within their local area. Ten community groups were supported, including: Mearns Community Coastal Path Group, Mearns Cycle Group, Luthermuir Community Group, Banchory Paths Group, Torphins Paths Group, Lumphanan Paths Group, Aboyne Paths, Greener Kemnay and Meldrum Paths Group and Fisherford Community Group. The £44,827 external funding secured, and the 6,185 metres of paths maintained or upgraded by the groups, was a substantial increase from the previous year.
- 5.3 The Outdoor Access Trust for Scotland (OATS) received a £10,000 annual contribution from Aberdeenshire Council towards OATS core costs. This financial support facilitates the delivery of access projects throughout Aberdeenshire. OATS was originally called Upper Deeside Access Trust and more recently Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust. OATS progressed three community paths projects and was involved in feasibility studies associated with the extension of the Deeside Way and the Gordon Way. Infrastructure Services Committee, in May 2019, agreed to the withdrawal of annual core funding for 2020/21 and to reallocate the budget to support community led path groups and access projects.
- 5.4 The Environment Team regularly engaged with several external organisations on outdoor access, including: Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry and Land Scotland, Paths for All, Sustrans, Cairngorms National Park Authority and Aberdeen City Council. The Team also regularly engaged with several Aberdeenshire services, including: Economic Development, Landscape Services, Transportation, Structures, Ranger Service, Development Management and Local Development Plan Policy Team.
- 5.5 The Environment Team worked with the Structures Team to install two bridges, as a pilot for future bridge upgrades, on the Formartine and Buchan Way. Community path advice and support was provided to the Transportation Team for the potential development of the Meldrum Meg Way and to the Kincardine and Mearns Area Project Officer for the progression of the Stonehaven Boardwalk Improvement Project.

<b><i>Promote the involvement of local path groups and other organisations in developing and managing outdoor access facilities</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Number of local and community groups worked with	10	8
Length of new path developed by community groups	6,185 metres	685 metres
<b><i>Identify external funding opportunities to enhance access provision in Aberdeenshire</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
External funding secured by community access groups	£44,827	£9,235
<b><i>Cross Service partnerships for path development</i></b>	<b><i>2019/20</i></b>	<b><i>2018/19</i></b>
Number of cross service projects	3	3

## **6 Aim 6 – Continuous Improvement**

- 6.1 **Ensure the Environment Team’s work in relation to the management and promotion of outdoor access is of high quality, efficient and continually improving and responsive to customer needs.**
- 6.2 The Team continues to work towards improving performance. Following on from last year’s Customer Survey with Development Management, as noted in 2.3 above, the introduction of improved monitoring processes and the change of emphasis to provide informal consultations ultimately led to improved consultation response times being achieved.
- 6.3 Work has continued in producing and maintaining a best practice manual on standard processes and procedures undertaken by the Environment Team. A particular focus was improving the formal process on upholding access rights cases managed and how the Team manages temporary access exemption requests.
- 6.4 The completion of the Community Path Information Pack has assisted community groups to develop a sustainable business model for path development within their community and successfully clarified the level of support the Environment Team can provide to the groups. The Access Asset – Inspection and Monitoring Project, once completed, will improve how the Environment Team manages and maintains paths and bridges, as part of an integrated asset management system.

<b><i>Develop and Monitor the Outdoor Access Strategy and Action Plan to ensure the Team's work meets the need and expectations of customers</i></b>	<b>2019/20</b>	<b>2018/19</b>
Up to date Strategy and Action Plan	Yes	Yes
Feedback from customer reviews	Ongoing	Yes – Development Management Survey
<b><i>Carry out annual monitoring and produce performance reports</i></b>	<b>2019/20</b>	<b>2018/19</b>
Completed annual performance report	Yes	Yes

<b><i>Maintain continuous service improvement</i></b>	<b>2019/20</b>	<b>2018/19</b>
Up to date Environment Team Best Practice Manual	Ongoing	Ongoing
<b><i>Ensure that staff have the correct and up to date knowledge and skills in order to give proper advice and deliver projects as required</i></b>	<b>2019/20</b>	<b>2018/19</b>
Completed Personal Performance	Completed	In progress
Staff training completed by the Team	28 hours	20 hours