

## **BULLETIN TO INFRASTRUCTURE SERVICES COMMITTEE – 8 JUNE 2022**

### **2021/22 ANNUAL REPORT ON ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL OUTDOOR ACCESS STRATEGY**

#### **1 Purpose of the Bulletin**

- 1.1 This Bulletin provides an update on the work of the Environment Team in relation to outdoor access for the period of 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022, as shown in the Aberdeenshire Council Environment Team Outdoor Access Strategy Annual Report (**Appendix 1**).

#### **2 Background/Discussion**

- 2.1 The Environment Team has the role of supporting and promoting outdoor access within Aberdeenshire and ensuring that the access rights of the public and the landowner are protected. The Environment Team, during the review period, had 3.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) permanent members of staff, split between 6 posts, who were directly involved in access work.
- 2.2 Environment Team work on outdoor access is driven by Aberdeenshire Council's Outdoor Access Strategy 2018-21, which provides a structured approach to service delivery over the three-year period. The Outdoor Access Strategy was approved by Infrastructure Services Committee on 23 August 2018 ([Item 8](#)). The Strategy was reviewed during 2021 and a new Strategy for the 2021-2024 period was taken to Area Committees for feedback prior to seeking approval at Infrastructure Services Committee. This was presented to Infrastructure Services Committee and agreed on 25 November 2021 subject to additional performance monitoring targets being included ([Item 7](#)). As the new Strategy was introduced at the end of the reporting period, the indicators within this Report are based on the previous Strategy. This is an annual update on the work of the Environment Team in relation to the Strategy.
- 2.3 The Outdoor Access Strategy focusses on the efficient and effective management and enhancement of existing paths and associated infrastructure. The Outdoor Access Strategy aims to promote and deliver responsible outdoor access that provides social, environmental and economic benefits. The Environment Team's vision for outdoor access is:
- “To facilitate access to a network of well-maintained and welcoming paths and protect access rights to enable residents and visitors to enjoy the area's diverse countryside and settlements”*
- 2.4 The Outdoor Access Strategy enables the Council to satisfy the relevant requirements of several national plans, policies and strategies including National Transport Strategy (2016), National Planning Framework 3, Scottish Planning Policy, National Walking Strategy (2014) and Cycling Action Plan for Scotland (2010).

## Summary of Annual Report for 2020/21

- 2.5 **Aim 1 – Promotion of Outdoor Access:** Part of the Team’s work is ensuring visitors and residents are provided with up-to-date information regarding access rights and responsibilities. This was especially important during the pandemic and the winter storms. Key information in relation to access provision in Aberdeenshire was made readily available through the “Paths and Outdoor Access” web pages. The website had 16,240 views.
- 2.6 There was increased emphasis during 2021/22 on promoting responsible outdoor access due to the unrepresented upsurge in people wanting to access Aberdeenshire’s countryside. The Environment Team worked with the Ranger Service, the Council’s Communications Team, Economic Development Service and Landscape Teams to support media releases to local and national press on the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and the promotion of responsible access and behaviour in the countryside. The Environment Team contributed and provided updates to the Aberdeenshire Visitor Management Plan for 2021.
- 2.7 Promotion of access opportunities is embedded in all project delivery. The core paths signage programme was rolled out with a start being made on signing a number of routes. The Environment Team supported the work of the Aberdeenshire Local Outdoor Access Forum (ALOAF) to make the countryside more accessible and enjoyable.
- 2.8 **Aim 2 – Ensure Development Protects and Enhances Outdoor Access Provision:** Despite the challenges presented by Covid-19 and winter storms the Environment Team continued to deliver its core business activities to protect and enhance outdoor access provision. Advice to Development Management was provided online and site visits were undertaken only where all other options, including virtual site visits, had been exhausted. The Environment Team provided 752 informal natural heritage advice consultation responses, involving screening for both potential access and natural heritage issues (note: separate for figures for access and natural heritage are not available), to Development Management. 49 formal consultation responses to Development Management were also provided with 76% of them provided within the 14-day consultation period. Consultation responses showed a near doubling in numbers compared to last year. The increased workload was definitely felt across the team and likely accounts for the drop in formal consultation responses within the 14-day time period from 100% last year to 76% this year. 80 consultation responses, in relation to Forestry Plans and Forestry Applications, were undertaken.
- 2.9 **Aim 3 – Upholding Access Rights:** There was an increased demand for people to access local paths and routes during the pandemic. This led to an increase in general access enquiries from the public, land managers and community groups. The Team dealt with 147 specific upholding access rights cases during the year. This is a significant increase from 69 cases from the previous year. Covid-19 restrictions meant that Officers streamlined their engagement process on access cases. Preliminary background information,

such as photos, videos and landowner information was sought from the public at the outset of an access case. This sped up the process and reduced travel. The Team supported ALOAF to fulfil its function in offering assistance to resolve access disputes.

2.10 **Aim 4 – Effective Management of Outdoor Access Infrastructure:** During 2021/22 the Environment Team focussed its project delivery on key strategic routes, mainly the Deeside Way, Formartine and Buchan Way and coastal paths. The Environment Team was very successful in bringing in external funding to support project delivery. The Environment Team managed £591,322 of access expenditure, upgrading 11,515 metres of core path and bringing in £453,869 of external grant funding. The Access Asset – Inspection and Monitoring Project, which will deliver an integrated access asset management system with other Services within Infrastructure Services commenced. Work to undertake a comprehensive core path inspection of Aberdeenshire’s core paths during 2022/23 was progressed. The Environment Team, through supporting community groups, resulted in 433 volunteer hours being delivered on path maintenance, upgrades and promotion in local communities.

2.11 **Aim 5 – Sustainable and Innovative Path Provision:** The Environment Team supported 12 community path groups to improve access provision within their local area. Community path groups levered in £71,200 of external funding by themselves and maintained 23,267 metres of path.

2.12 **Aim 6 - Continuous Improvement:** The Team continues to work towards improving performance and revise its procedures to ensure consistency in approach, and a robust approach to business continuity, an issue which has been brought into sharp focus following the events of the last 2 years. Work continued in producing and maintaining a Best Practice Manual on standard processes and procedures with a particular focus on how the Team manages access cases.

### 3 **Scheme of Governance**

3.1 The Committee is able to consider this item in terms of Section F.7.1 of the List of Committee Powers in Part 2A of the Scheme of Governance as it allows scrutiny and review of the activity of the Aberdeenshire Council Environment Team in relation to the Outdoor Access Strategy.

### 4 **Implications and Risk**

4.1 An Equality Impact Assessment is not required because this Bulletin is only to inform the Committee on the performance of the Environment Team and does not have a differential impact on any of the protected characteristics.

4.2 There are no specific staffing or financial implications arising from this Bulletin, but trends are used to inform future budget and work planning.

4.3 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to the on-going delivery of the Outdoor Access Strategy on a Corporate Level ([Corporate Risk Register](#)):

- *Budget Pressures*: The Environment Team draws in funding from external grant sources such as NESTANS, Sustrans, Transport Scotland and funding through community groups. The Team will monitor and seek external funding opportunities when they arise.
- *Working with other organisations*: As above - the Environment Team will always seek to work with internal and external partners to maximise the efficient and effective protection, enhancement, and promotion of Aberdeenshire's Outdoor access requirements.

4.4 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to the on-going delivery of the Outdoor Access Strategy on a Strategic Level ([Directorate Risk Registers](#)):

- *Active Travel*: It is recognised that there is a risk of lack of funding for delivery and maintenance of the access network and consequently lack of opportunities to ensure active facilities for communities. The Environment Team will continue to deliver access improvements, provide support, advice, and promote best practice to residents, visitors, developers, groups, and communities within Aberdeenshire to ensure that they have access to appropriate outdoor facilities so they can pursue an active lifestyle.

**Alan Wood**  
**Director of Environment and Infrastructure Services**

Bulletin prepared by Mathew Watt and Craig Stewart  
2 May 2022

#### **List of Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Environment Team Outdoor Access Strategy Annual Report 2021/22

## ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT TEAM OUTDOOR ACCESS STRATEGY ANNUAL REPORT 2021/22

### 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Environment Team has the role of supporting and promoting outdoor access within Aberdeenshire and ensuring that the access rights of the public and the landowner are protected. Environment Teamwork during 2020/21 on outdoor access is driven by Aberdeenshire Council's Outdoor Access Strategy 2018-21 and a new Strategy for the 2021-2024 period. The Strategies provide a structured approach to service delivery over a three-year period.
- 1.2 Despite the continued challenges and impacts presented by Covid-19 and the winter storms the Environment Team continued to deliver its core business activities in relation to outdoor access. Due to Covid restrictions there was a continued upsurge in people wanting to access Aberdeenshire's countryside due to wider travel restrictions resulting in a substantial increase in access cases. Continuing with an online provision of consultation responses to Development Management did ensure continuity of service. Outdoor access project delivery focussed on projects which were externally funded or had essential health and safety implications. The Environment Team has continued to engage with an increasing number of community groups as we move out of Covid-19.

### 2 Aim 1 - Promotion of Outdoor Access

- 2.1 **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.**

<b>Maintain and improve Outdoor Access Page</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Number of views of outdoor access webpage	16,240	16,083
<b>Ensure the Core Path Plan continues to be relevant and up to date</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Amendments to Core Path Plan	0	1
<b>Progress signage of core path network</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Length of core path signed	3	0

<b>Work with internal partners, external bodies and interested groups in promoting outdoor access</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Number of public sessions attended	3	4

- 2.2 Part of the Team’s work is ensuring visitors and residents are provided with up-to-date information regarding access rights and responsibilities. This was especially important during the pandemic to ensure that key information in relation to access provision in Aberdeenshire was easily and readily available. Access information was provided in Covid-19 updates and the “Paths and Outdoor Access” web pages which had 16,240 views.
- 2.3 The winter storms brought unprecedented disruption to the wider area including a number of country parks and the path networks. Several sites were closed for assessment and work is continuing to reopen sites as soon as possible. It is envisaged that this work will continue throughout this year to ensure people can access recreation sites in a safe manner.
- 2.4 The Environment Team assisted with the updated Aberdeenshire Visitor Management Plan for 2022. The cross-Service plan provides a warm welcome to the public to enjoy Aberdeenshire’s outdoors and also mitigates against any adverse impacts from increased recreation in sensitive or popular locations. The Environment Team aided the Ranger Service in targeting a number of key sites to ensure appropriate access to the wider countryside.
- 2.5 Core paths provide a framework of key paths which promotes local access opportunities, meet community needs and at the same time minimises any potential conflict with land management. Ongoing amendments and additions to the Aberdeenshire Core Path Plan are required to keep the Plan up to date and relevant. There was no requirement in this period to amend any routes with the Core Path Plan. The delivery of the core path sign posting programme has commenced with a number of sites identified and the installation of signs started.
- 2.6 The Environment Team usually supports Aberdeenshire Local Outdoor Access Forum (ALOAF) to promote access in Aberdeenshire at public events, however, these events were unfortunately cancelled during 2021/22. Several events are however planned for the 2022/23 year.
- 2.7 Promotion of improved access opportunities is embedded into all access. Path improvements to the Formartine and Buchan Way and the Deeside Way were promoted by the Environment Team, including health checks on these two main routes.
- 2.8 The Coast Aberdeenshire Project progressed with the appointment of a Coast Aberdeenshire Project Officer to engage and build capacity within local

communities to take forward their own projects for expansion/enhancement along the coastal path.

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

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

3.2

<b>Provide input to national policy guidance and development</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Number of national consultations responded to	0	1
<b>Provide input to Local Development Plan process</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Input into Local Development Plan process	1	3
<b>Provide consultation advice and support to the Development Management process</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Total number of informal surgery responses	752	443
Total number of formal consultation responses	49	26
Percentage of formal consultations to planning applications responded to within 14 days	76%	100%
Number of Development Management training days supported	2	0
Number of Development Management meetings attended	0	4

<b>Consultation advice and support for forestry applications</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Number of forestry consultations	80	61
Consultation advice and support for agri-environment applications	57	1
<b>Consultation advice and support for agri-environment applications</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Number of agri-environment consultations	0	1

- 3.3 The Environment Team have continued to assist with preparation work for the next Local Development Plan in terms of contributing to policy development and outdoor access guidance.
- 3.4 Despite the continued challenges presented by Covid-19 and winter storms, the Environment Team continued to deliver its core business activities to protect and enhance outdoor access provision. During the course of the year the Environment Team provided 752 informal natural heritage advice consultation responses, involving screening for both potential access and natural heritage issues (note: separate figures for access and natural heritage are not available), to Development Management through weekly/fortnightly surgeries. 49 formal consultation responses to Development Management were also provided with 76% of them provided within the 14-day consultation period. Consultation responses showed a near doubling in numbers compared to last year. The increased workload was definitely felt across the team and likely accounts for the drop in formal consultation responses within the 14-day time period from 100% last year to 76% this year. The measures around the pandemic resulted in a significant change to the surgery process which had included a face-to-face element prior to March 2020. The surgeries continued online, however the allotted weekly time slots were kept and weekly reminder/update emails went out from Environment Planners so as to keep the contact levels high and to maintain a close working relationship with Development Management. Site visits were undertaken only where all other options, including virtual site visits, had been exhausted and as national restrictions allowed.
- 3.5 There was no specific demand or need for the delivery of a training session for Development Management staff relating specifically to access issues. This will be monitored during the forthcoming year with the option of delivering a future tailored session based on emerging needs.



3.6 80 consultation responses, involving screening for access issues, were undertaken in relation to Forestry Plans and Forestry Applications and one agri-environment consultation.

#### 4 Aim 3 – Upholding Access Rights

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

<b>Upholding access rights</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Number of access cases	147	69
Number of formal Notices served on owners of land to uphold access rights (Section 14's)	0	0
<b>Facilitate legitimate short-term public access restrictions</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Number of temporary access rights suspensions (Section 11 Orders)	2	0
<b>Ensure proper process is in place relating to Council responsibilities in upholding access rights</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Continue best practice guidance notes on upholding access rights	2	2
<b>Support Local Access Forum in advising on outdoor access matters throughout Aberdeenshire as appropriate</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Number of access issues consulted	7	2

4.2 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. The Team dealt with 147 upholding access rights cases during the year. The Team dealt with 147 specific upholding access rights cases during the year. This is a significant increase from 69 cases from the previous year and Access Officers worked extremely hard to minimise the backlog of cases. Additional preliminary background information, such as photos, videos, and landowner information, was sought from the public at the outset, to speed up the process and reduce travel. Where an amicable solution is not possible, as a last resort, a formal Notice is served on the owner. Due to Access Officers resolving the cases, no formal Notice was served during the year. Work was ongoing to improve the process for how access cases are

managed by access staff. During the last quarter of the year the Environment Team was reduced to one part time Access Officer, due to retirement. This situation has now been resolved through the recruitment of an additional Access Officer. The Access Team also supported two seasonal Access Rangers through their work with the Rangers Team.

- 4.3 The unprecedented numbers of visitors to Aberdeenshire’s countryside and coast did lead to a significant rise in general access enquiries from the public, land managers and community groups regarding access and access rights. The Environment Team contributed to the updated Visitor Management Plan 2022, to ensure a continued safe and welcoming approach for visitors to the area.
- 4.4 The Environment Team did liaise with several internal and external partners during lockdown and in preparation for an extremely busy outdoor period in terms of responsible access rights as restrictions eased. Internal partners involved Economic Development; Landscape Services; Ranger Service; Roads and Waste. External partners involved NatureScot; Visit Aberdeenshire; Cairngorms National Park Authority; Aberdeen City.
- 4.5 The Environment Team assisted and supported ALOAF and its new members, through training and capacity building, to maximise the potential of the Forum as an independent, expert, and trusted organisation providing advice on outdoor access matters throughout Aberdeenshire. Access Officers assisted ALOAF in holding their meetings online.

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

- 5.1 **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.**

<b>Implement a paths management and maintenance process</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Length of core path upgraded	11,515m	11,500 metres
Money spent on core path maintenance, path enhancement projects and health and safety issues.	£591,322	£192,713
External grant funding secured	£453,869	£183,939

<b>Establish a robust monitoring and inspection regime for paths and access related assets</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Percentage of Environment Team bridges routinely inspected as part of an inspection programme	100%	96%
Percentage of Environment Team paths routinely inspected as part of an inspection programme	Progressing through the Core Path Survey project	Not progressed due to Covid-19 restrictions
<b>Develop a volunteer policy and procedures to increase volunteering</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Development of Community Path Information Pack	Completed and reviewed 2020/21	Completed and reviewed.
Volunteer hours spent on path maintenance and promotional work	433	2,376 hours

5.2 The Environment Team has responsibility for numerous paths and associated infrastructure throughout Aberdeenshire. External funding was increasingly sought, and opportunities maximised to support project delivery. The Environment Team were very successful in bringing in external funding. During 2021/22 the Environment Team managed £591,322 of expenditure, upgrading 11,515 metres of core path, and bringing in £453,869 of external grant funding. This was a substantial increase in external funding brought in to deliver projects. Expenditure involved works on the Deeside Way, the Formartine and Buchan Way, coastal paths, and the wider path network. The Coast Aberdeenshire Project was progressed with the project aim of promoting and enhancing awareness of the coastal path corridor resource and identifying target initiatives to improve or create sections of the coastal path.

5.3 Work on the Access Asset – Inspection and Monitoring Project has progressed which upon completion will deliver an integrated asset management system to assist in the identification, management and monitoring of Environment Team paths, bridges, and associated infrastructure. This will be similar to the one used by Landscape Services and the Structures Teams. 100% of bridge inspections have been completed. Work to undertake a comprehensive Core Path Survey Project commenced and it is envisaged that all paths will be surveyed in 2022/23.

5.4 The Community Path Information Pack, which provides support and guidance for community access groups, was reviewed, updated, and promoted. The pack continues to be a valuable resource for communities. Preliminary work to develop a grant scheme to assist communities to improve access in their local area is being progressed.

## 6 Aim 5 – Sustainable and Innovative Path Provision

6.1 **To enable the continued development of path provision throughout Aberdeenshire without increasing the management and maintenance burden on the Council.**

<b>Promote the involvement of local path groups and other organisations in developing and managing outdoor access facilities</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Number of local and community groups worked with	12	13
Length of path maintained or developed by community groups	23,267m	16,060 metres maintained , 290 metres of new paths
<b>Identify external funding opportunities to enhance access provision in Aberdeenshire</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
External funding secured by community access groups	£70,900	£15,354
<b>Cross Service partnerships for path development</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Number of cross service projects supported	2	3

6.2 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. 12 community groups were supported in relation to access, including: Mearns Community Coastal Path Group (MERCHAT), Mearns Path Group, Aboyne Community Group, Banchory Paths Group, Torphins Paths Group, Lumphanan Paths Group, Greener Kemnay and Meldrum Paths Group, Invercairn Community Council and Durriss Community Group. Significant

external funding was secured by community groups which has allowed 23,267 metres of paths to be maintained or upgraded.

- 6.3 The Environment Team supported Nestrans and North East Adventure Tourism (NEAT) in the initial stages of development of the Core Path Survey Project and the Coastal Path Survey, respectively.
- 6.4 The Environment Team regularly engaged with several external organisations to improve or manage outdoor access, including: NatureScot, Forestry and Land Scotland, Paths for All, Sustrans, Nestrans, Cairngorms National Park Authority and Aberdeen City Council. The Team also regularly engaged with several Aberdeenshire Council Services, including Economic Development, Landscape Services, Transportation, Structures, Ranger Service, Development Management, and the Local Development Plan Policy Team.

## 7 Aim 6 – Continuous Improvement

- 7.1 **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.**

<b>Develop and Monitor the Outdoor Access Strategy and Action Plan to ensure the Team’s work meets the need and expectations of customers</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Up to date Strategy and Action Plan	Yes	Yes
Feedback from customer reviews	Ongoing	Ongoing
<b>Carry out annual monitoring and produce performance reports</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Completed annual performance report	Yes	Yes
<b>Maintain continuous service improvement</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Up to date Environment Team Best Practice Manual	Ongoing	Ongoing

<b>Ensure that staff have the correct and up to date knowledge and skills in order to give proper advice and deliver projects as required</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Completed Personal Performance	Completed	Completed
Staff training completed by the Team	47hours	25 hours

- 7.2 The Team continues to work towards improving performance. The review, development, and implementation of the Outdoor Access Strategy Annual Action Plan, continues to provide a focus for a structured approach to service delivery for the Environment Team in relation to outdoor access.
- 7.3 The Development Management/Environment Team protocol, which was created in the previous year, was reviewed, based on feedback, to further refine/improve the process in light of restrictions and increased case numbers . Continued monitoring/review, going forward will ensure that the process is fit for purpose and ensures a timely response to consultations requests.
- 7.4 Work continued on producing and maintaining a Best Practice Manual on standard processes and procedures undertaken by the Environment Team. A particular focus was on improving how access cases are recorded and administered using the “Report It” function on Aberdeenshire’s website. This function will continue to be monitored to ensure it is fit for purpose and a useful tool for both officers and public use.
- 7.5 There was a review, update, and promotion of the Community Path Information Pack during 2021/22. The 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.
- 7.6 The Planning and Environment Training Database is a “one stop shop” for all training opportunities relating to the work of the Environment Team in relation to outdoor access. This has been fully utilised during 2021/22, with significant numbers of training courses being made available online, participation on training courses by staff was up this year albeit practical elements and the valuable ‘in person’ contact was limited.
- 7.7 The Environment Team continued to deliver its access functions in a challenging year due to Covid restrictions and substantial damage from winter

storms. In the forthcoming year, the team will continue to deliver the aims and objectives contained within the Outdoor Access Strategy to ensure a welcoming and safe outdoor environment.

**Alan Wood, Director of Environment and Infrastructure Services**

**Report Author: Matthew Watt, Environment Planner  
28 April 2022**