

ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT TEAM OUTDOOR ACCESS STRATEGY ANNUAL REPORT 2020/21

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 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.

- 1.2 Despite the challenges presented by Covid-19 and the reduction in staffing levels due to the retirement of a staff member, the Environment Team continued to deliver the majority of its core business activities in relation to outdoor access. The unprecedented upsurge of people wanting to access the Aberdeenshire's countryside did lead to change of emphasis of the Team to concentrate on promoting the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and mitigating against negative impacts of increased visitor numbers at sensitive and popular locations. Access Officers were kept extremely busy dealing with access cases and issues in relation to upholding access rights. Moving to 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. Increased support was provided by the Team to assist the growing interest by local communities keen to maintain and improve path provision within their local area.

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.

- 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 had 16,083 views.

- 2.3 The Environment Team assisted with the development of the Re-opening of the Countryside Plan for 2020 and the Aberdeenshire Visitor Management Plan for 2021. The cross-Service plan provides a warm welcome to the public to enjoy Aberdeenshire's outdoors and also mitigates against any impacts from increased recreation in sensitive or popular locations.

- 2.4 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. Due to Covid-19 restrictions and reduced staffing levels only one amendment to the Core Path Plan was progressed. The delivery of the core path sign posting programme was suspended but will recommence in 2021/22 as part of an ongoing rolling programme.

- 2.5 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 2020/21.
- 2.6 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. Work commenced to develop a Deeside Way micro-site on VisitScotland's website. There were 4 public meetings and an engagement exercise, which generated over 700 responses, associated with the Coast Aberdeenshire Project.

<i>Maintain and improve Outdoor Access Page</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Number of views of outdoor access webpage	16,083	17,915	8,043
<i>Ensure the Core Path Plan continues to be relevant and up to date</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Amendments to Core Path Plan	1	0	0
<i>Progress signage of core path network</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Length of core path signed	0	628 metres	2,700 metres
<i>Work with internal partners, external bodies and interested groups in promoting outdoor access</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Number of public sessions attended	4	5	6

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 The Environment Team have continued to assist preparation work for the next Local Development Plan in terms of reviewing access policy wording.
- 3.3 Despite the challenges presented by Covid-19, 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 443 informal natural heritage advice consultation responses, involving screening for potential access issues, to Development Management through weekly/fortnightly surgeries. Twenty-six formal consultation responses to Development Management were also provided with 100% of them provided within the 14-day consultation period. 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 moved 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.
- 3.4 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 2021/22 with the option of delivering a future tailored session based on emerging needs. There was attendance by Environment Team member at four Development Management meetings
- 3.5 Sixty-one consultation responses, involving screening for access issues, were undertaken in relation to Forestry Plans and Forestry Applications and one agri-environment consultation.

<i>Provide input to national policy guidance and development</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Number of national consultations responded to	1	1	0
<i>Provide input to Local Development Plan process</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Input into Local Development Plan process	3 text reviews	11	On-going
<i>Provide consultation advice and support to the Development Management process</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>

Total number of informal surgery responses	443	564	461
Total number of formal consultation responses	26	43	57
Percentage of formal consultations to planning applications responded to within 14 days	100%	79%	53.5%
Number of Development Management training days supported	0	0	1
Number of Development Management meetings attended	4	0	6
Consultation advice and support for forestry applications	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Number of forestry consultations	61	58	80
Consultation advice and support for gri-environment applications			
Consultation advice and support for agri-environment applications	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Number of agri-environment consultations	1	0	9

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.
- 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 sixty-nine upholding access rights cases during the year. Due to the increased public access pressures, a number of these cases were either complex, large or generated heightened public interest. Covid-19 restrictions did inhibit Access Officers ability to visit sites to resolve access cases and the nature of the access cases were particularly complex due to the unique nature of the issues as we came out of lockdown. Access Officers did work 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.

- 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.
- 4.4 The Environment Team did liaise with a number of 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.

<i>Upholding access rights</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Number of access cases	69	67	57
Number of formal Notices served on owners of land to uphold access rights (Section 14's)	0	1	1
<i>Facilitate legitimate short-term public access restrictions</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Number of temporary access rights suspensions (Section 11 Orders)	0	2	3
<i>Ensure proper process is in place relating to Council responsibilities in upholding access rights</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Complete best practice guidance notes on upholding access rights	2	3	Ongoing
<i>Support Local Access Forum in advising on outdoor access matters throughout Aberdeenshire as appropriate</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Number of access issues consulted	2	4	2

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.
- 5.2 The Environment Team has responsibility for numerous paths and associated infrastructure throughout Aberdeenshire. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, reduced staffing levels and budgetary restrictions the path maintenance and upgrade programme for 2020/21 was considerably modified. Project delivery concentrated on committed or legally obliged expenditure, addressing any immediate health and safety issues and delivering projects with external funding. As a result, some paths were closed or had temporary safety warning signs. External funding to support project delivery was the main focus of works. During 2020/21 the Environment Team managed £192,713 of expenditure, upgrading 11,500 metres of core path and bringing in £183,939 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 and survey work on stretches of the coastal path in north Kincardine and Mearns. 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 sections of the coastal path.
- 5.3 Work on the Access Asset – Inspection and Monitoring Project was postponed due to Covid-19 restrictions and staff capacity within the Environment Team and Landscape Services. Upon completion, the project will deliver an integrated asset management system, similar to the one used by Landscape Services and the Structures Teams, to assist in the identification, management and monitoring of Environment Team paths, bridges and associated infrastructure. 96% of bridge inspections have been completed and path inspections will commence in 2021/22.
- 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. 2,376 volunteer hours were delivered on path maintenance and upgrades. The increase in hours from the previous year is impressive bearing in mind Covid-19 restrictions.

<i>Implement a paths management and maintenance process</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Length of core path upgraded	11,500 metres	4,605 metres	3,298 metres
Money spent on core path maintenance, path	£192,713	£250,366	£178,220

enhancement projects and health and safety issues.			
External grant funding secured	£183,939	£81,582	£0
<i>Establish a robust monitoring and inspection regime for paths and access related assets</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Percentage of Environment Team bridges routinely inspected as part of an inspection programme	96%	To be implemented in years 3 of Strategy	To be implemented in years 3 of Strategy
Percentage of Environment Team paths routinely inspected as part of an inspection programme	Not progressed due to Covid-19 restrictions	To be implemented in year 3 of Strategy	To be implemented in year 3 of Strategy
<i>Develop a volunteer policy and procedures to increase volunteering</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Development of Community Path Information Pack	Completed and reviewed.	Completed	To be implemented in year 2 of Strategy
Volunteer hours spent on path maintenance and promotional work	2,376 hours	2,296 hours	953 hours

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.
- 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. 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. Thirteen community groups were supported in relation to access, including: Mearns Community Coastal Path Group (MERCHAT), Mearns Cycle Group, Luthermuir Community Group, Banchory Paths Group, Torphins Paths Group, Lumphanan Paths Group, Aboyne Paths and Tracks Group, Alford Paths Group, Westhill Paths Group, Greener Kemnay and Meldrum Paths Group, Invercairn Community Council and Fisherford Community

Group. Understandably external funding secured by groups reduced to £15,354. Despite this, the length of paths maintained or upgraded by community groups actually increased substantially to 16,060 metres.

- 6.3 Path advice and support was provided to the Transportation Team for the potential development of the Meldrum Meg Way; to the Kincardine and Mearns Area Project Officer for the progression of the Stonehaven Boardwalk Improvement Project, and to Economic Development for the potential development of the North East Highland Way.
- 6.4 The Environment Team regularly engaged with several external organisations on outdoor access, including: NatureScot, Forestry and Land Scotland, Paths for All, Sustrans, 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.

<i>Promote the involvement of local path groups and other organisations in developing and managing outdoor access facilities</i>	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Number of local and community groups worked with	13	10	8
Length of path maintained or developed by community groups	16,060 metres maintained, 290 metres of new paths	6,185 metres	685 metres
<i>Identify external funding opportunities to enhance access provision in Aberdeenshire</i>	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
External funding secured by community access groups	£15,354	£44,827	£9,235
<i>Cross Service partnerships for path development</i>	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Number of cross service projects supported	3	3	3

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.
- 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 2020/21 saw the development and completion of an Environment and Development Management Consultation Protocol. The Protocol clearly sets out the consultation processes between the Environment Team and Development Management. The introduction of a monitoring process for Environment Team consultation responses ultimately led to improved consultation response times being achieved.
- 7.4 Work continued in 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.
- 7.5 The review, update and promotion 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.
- 7.6 The creation of a Planning and Environment Training Database during 2020/21 created a “one stop shop” for all training opportunities relating to the work of the Environment Team in relation to outdoor access. With significant numbers of training courses being made available online during the pandemic, participation on training courses by staff was up this year albeit practical elements and the valuable ‘in person’ contact was limited.

<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>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Up to date Strategy and Action Plan	Yes	Yes	Yes
Feedback from customer reviews	Ongoing	Ongoing	Yes – Development Management Survey

<i>Carry out annual monitoring and produce performance reports</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Completed annual performance report	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Maintain continuous service improvement</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Up to date Environment Team Best Practice Manual	Ongoing	Ongoing	Ongoing
<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>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>	<i>2018/19</i>
Completed Personal Performance	Completed	In progress	In progress
Staff training completed by the Team	25 hours	20 hours	20 hours