



Active in the Outdoors: for health, economy and environment



Proposals for the 2026-31 Scottish Parliament

The Scottish Outdoor Recreation Alliance (SORA) is a coalition of the main outdoor recreation organisations - representing activities which include walking, climbing, snow-sports touring, cycling, paddling and horse-riding.

The proposals we present here are for political parties to consider for their manifestos for the Scottish election in May 2026.



We invite parties to include the following commitment in their 2026 manifesto:

Scotland is blessed with iconic landscapes and much-loved green spaces. We also lead the world in legal rights for people to access and enjoy those outdoor spaces.

However, many of our paths to the countryside and nature need to be restored, opened up and signposted so everyone can benefit.

That is why we will introduce an ambitious “Paths into Nature” programme 2026-31, backed by a £50 million Scottish Paths Fund, to improve the quality, accessibility and visibility of our paths in outdoor spaces¹.

1. Paths include all recreational routes including bridle paths and access to waterways for paddlers



What policies are needed to deliver this commitment?

1. Scottish Paths Fund

While access rights extend to almost all open land and inland water, paths are vital to how those rights are exercised, especially for people new to outdoor activity. To improve the quality and accessibility of recreational paths, we recommend bringing together existing funding to create a single **Scottish Paths Fund of at least £50 million.**

2. Mapped core paths

Many of Scotland's most popular paths are designated by local authorities as "core paths". However, despite the network extending to 22,000km, core paths are not well-understood. In England and Wales all public rights of way are shown on OS maps, but Ordnance Survey, a government agency, has refused to do so for core paths in Scotland. The new Scottish Government should work with the UK Government to **ensure core paths are shown on OS maps.**

3. Guidance to access authorities

At the local level, access authorities (local authorities and national park authorities) have a legal duty to uphold access rights, including safeguarding core paths and public rights of way. They also co-ordinate on-the-ground staff such as rangers, a service crucial to how people enjoy outdoor activity, and which supports the understanding of access responsibilities. **Guidance to access authorities on how to discharge their roles dates from 2005** and is in urgent need of review to bring it in line with legislation and the changing scale and nature of demand. The guidance would then be a solid foundation for establishing what a core service looks like and what level of funding is needed to deliver the service.

4. NatureScot must champion access

At the national level, NatureScot is the government agency with responsibility for outdoor access. However, its capacity to fulfil that role is being eroded. The organisation's **statutory duties should be amended** to reflect its role as our national access champion. That could mean, for example, NatureScot hosting a comprehensive map of all of Scotland's paths and a revitalised promotion of Scotland's Great Trails, as a very attractive part of Scotland's visitor economy. It should also lead in a new three way public-private-NGO partnership of education, engagement and promotion of access rights and responsibilities.

5. Outdoor Access for All

All of the above actions would result in the biggest boost to outdoor recreation for a generation with many benefits for health and the visitor economy. But access to the outdoors remains unequal and to secure the health benefits, in particular, means tackling that inequality head-on. **That is why the next Scottish Government must develop an Outdoor Access for All initiative.** The good news is that the building blocks of this initiative are already in place, across different stakeholders and funders.





Key ingredients might include:

- Pilot projects targeted at specific neighbourhoods or communities
- Partnerships with organisations with reach into those communities
- Establishing peer support and champions from target communities
- Packages offering skills, confidence and materials.



How much will this cost?

The single biggest cost is capital funding for a Scottish Paths Fund. Our estimate, starting at £50 million for the full 5 years of the parliamentary term, is equivalent to £10 million a year although, in practice, it would be phased in over the 5 years. A commitment of £50 million would create a level and certainty of investment which would be both deliverable and represent a step change.

The Scottish Paths Fund would be focused on paths used for outdoor recreation, so will complement active travel funding. Typically, the funding would be for investment in surfacing and drainage, gates, bridges and signage, with a focus on replacing stiles with fully accessible gates to ensure easier use by less mobile people, as well as cyclists, and horse-riders and paddlers. Funding recipients would include local authorities, national parks, community projects and landowners. The funding would also complement visitor infrastructure funding via Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund and visitor levies to support associated services infrastructure like toilets, waste collection and transport access.

£50 million is not all new money but would be part-funded by bringing together existing funds and amplified by leveraging other sources of capital funding, such as community benefit funding from energy projects and private sources.

As well as a headline sum for capital, resource funding for access authorities needs to be refreshed in line with core service benchmarks agreed as part of the review of their 2005 guidance. Modest resource funding will also be needed for education, promotion and the Outdoor Access for All initiative.



Pound for pound, there are few policy choices which are so popular and which deliver such public benefit as the programme outlined above. We look forward to discussing this both before and after the election.



Up to 80% of people in Scotland enjoy the activities which our organisations champion. These activities are popular and resonant with voters and critical to the nation's health, mental wellbeing, environment and a sustainable visitor economy.

Expanding the reach of outdoor recreation is a win-win.

Scottish Outdoor Recreation Alliance:

Mountaineering Scotland, Ramblers Scotland, Cycling UK in Scotland, Paddle Scotland, British Horse Society Scotland, ScotWays (Scottish Rights of Way and Access Society) and Scottish Sports Association.



Please email scotland@ramblers.org.uk to discuss this manifesto with any members of the alliance in more detail.

