

National Access Forum



Scotland

Roseanna Cunningham MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform
The Scottish Government
St. Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

23 June 2020

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

SCOTTISH OUTDOOR ACCESS – RESOURCING NEEDS FOR EFFECTIVE ACCESS MANAGEMENT AND GREEN RECOVERY

I have been asked to write on behalf of the National Access Forum (NAF) to highlight the importance of adequate resourcing for outdoor access in Scotland.

As you know, the right of responsible access represents one of the most successful and popular provisions passed by the Scottish Parliament. In recent weeks there has been a very substantial and generally welcome increase in the numbers of people taking advantage of this right as they have enjoyed outdoor exercise during the coronavirus emergency.

At a (virtual) meeting of NAF on 5 June, the feedback about ways in which people have exercised this right was generally positive. SNH's guidance on access during the emergency was considered helpful, and it was felt that most people had behaved responsibly and complied with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. However, in some places there have been significant problems and points of tension. The National Farmers' Union of Scotland said that support for farmers from access authorities has been patchy (due to lack of staff, or severe pressure on existing staff) and that some farmers have been unable to get help from Police Scotland (whose resources have also been very stretched). This has left farmers feeling isolated when faced with access-related problems. Some of these problems have led to the death of sheep and cows, causing heavy financial loss to farmers as well as distress to the animals. On the other hand, NAF has also heard concerns from access-takers about the erection of unauthorised signs purporting to deny people access across land (or along rights of way). Urban areas have faced particularly significant pressures on paths and greenspaces due the high numbers of people enjoying the outdoors close to home during the lock-down.

For several years NAF members have been very concerned about the lack of sufficient investment in staff and infrastructure for rural and urban outdoor access, and some of them have made their own representations to Ministers about this. This decline in funding, highlighted by the increased activity of recent weeks, is evidenced by the fact that the number of local authority/National Park access officer posts fell from 67 in 2006 to 50 in 2016 (the last date for which we have official data), and there are now probably fewer than 40 access officers in Scotland. Meanwhile, the number of countryside rangers employed by public and voluntary organisations is also falling. In 2018 a Scottish Countryside Rangers Association survey revealed that 141 posts had been lost since 2008, leaving only 269 full-time rangers in Scotland. This means that there is less capacity available to promote positive messages at local level about compliance with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, or to address problems

National Access Forum

Contact: Janice Winning, NAFsec@nature.scot

on the ground. Access officers and rangers are often the first point of contact for land managers or access-takers who are facing difficulties - and they are generally best placed to “nip problems in the bud” by identifying pragmatic solutions to local problems.

There is also an urgent need for investment (both capital and revenue) in the creation and maintenance of access infrastructure, such as paths and car parks. The benefits of providing access facilities for health and well-being have come into the spotlight in recent weeks and should remain a priority in the future – this should include urban areas where there is often under-provision of high quality publicly accessible greenspace for more deprived communities.

Looking ahead, Scotland has an opportunity to translate the current increase in outdoor exercise into a legacy of increased responsible outdoor recreation and active travel, as part of a “green recovery” from the current pandemic. This can obviously bring clear benefits for health and well-being, and could also play a key role in restoring tourism and other recreation-related sectors of the rural economy, including fragile island communities. But it will depend upon adequate funding: to provide advice and support for land managers; to make sure that people understand their responsibilities under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code; and to develop and maintain the necessary physical infrastructure in both urban and rural areas. This will require a broad approach at all levels of government, with funding for access being linked to health, tourism and placemaking as well as the post Brexit rural support that will replace and improve on current European programmes (such as the SRDP Improving Public Access and Woodland Access schemes, the Natural and Cultural Heritage Fund and the Green Infrastructure Strategic Intervention Fund). Members of the Forum hope that the Scottish Government will actively support efforts to ensure that more priority is given to the importance of such funding.

We are also copying this letter to Fergus Ewing and Joe FitzPatrick given their responsibilities for the rural economy and tourism, and for health and sport.

Yours sincerely,

David Henderson-Howat
Convenor, National Access Forum

Cc Fergus Ewing MSP,
Joe FitzPatrick MSP