

Comhairle Na Tuaithe's pilot Mountain Access Scheme

1. Context

Difficulty regarding access to the hills was a central reason underpinning the establishment of Comhairle na Tuaithe (the Countryside Council) by Minister O Cuiv in January 2004. Since then Comhairle has agreed a set of access parameters (2005), published a National Countryside Recreation Strategy (2006), introduced a scheme to pay landowners for carrying out maintenance on marked walking routes (2008) and funded the appointment of Rural Recreation Officers (RROs) in 12 areas of the country (2008).

Comhairle is currently piloting a Mountain Access Scheme that potentially provides a solution to the difficult issue of access to the Irish uplands. Due to the administrative and Ministerial changes that occurred over the last two years progress on the pilot was delayed, but has recently gathered momentum.

2. The pilot Mountain Access Scheme

The Mountain Access Scheme is being piloted in two areas, Mount Gable in Co. Galway and Carrauntoohil, Co. Kerry. One of the features of this scheme is that it is based on a voluntary agreement with landowners, rather than any legal framework. To ensure the viability of the scheme is fully tested, it is intended to assess options for an extension in 2013 to a number of other pilot areas with different characteristics.

It is likely that the mountain or upland areas selected for any subsequent pilot phase would be heavily used for hillwalking and possibly other forms of recreation, they should be close to large centres of population and there should be a range of services (eg shops, transport and accommodation) available in the vicinity, if possible. The presence of a Rural Recreation Officer (RRO) in the area would make it easier to progress a pilot Mountain Access Area.

It has also considered that the next phase of pilots may include at least one area where the land is owned individually by a number of landowners rather than jointly as commonage, and that Mountain Access Areas will be developed, in partnership with Coillte, in areas where Coillte owns a significant proportion of the land, or where Coillte provides locally important recreation infrastructure.

3. How the Mountain Access Scheme works

By agreeing access with all the landowners in a defined mountain or upland area, producing a map showing designated access points, indemnifying the landowners, providing parking and any infrastructure required to sustain recreational use, the Mountain Access Scheme sets out to manage recreational enjoyment of mountain areas in a way that minimises

inconvenience for landowners and local residents and means that use of the area can be promoted with clarity and confidence.

Each Mountain Access Area should be supported by an RRO or a designated farmers' liaison officer. In consultation with relevant stakeholders the RRO will define a possible Mountain Access Area. All landowners (public and private) and active commonage holders in the area will be identified and approached, asking for their agreement to be part of the scheme. The benefits to private landowners are set out in section 4.

The RRO in consultation with relevant stakeholders including landowners and walking clubs will agree entry/exit points to the Mountain Access Area, decide what infrastructure is required and arrange for this to be put in place (possibly through the Rural Social Scheme). Infrastructure would include an information panel with a map of the Mountain Access Area, a brief description of the area, plus safety and good practice tips for recreational users.

The Mountain Access Scheme is a different proposition to a marked walking route and this difference should be emphasised in all discussions with landowners, through all publicity, web-based information and the information panels to be erected at the Mountain Access Points.

The Rural Recreation Section is in the process of finalising an indemnity arrangement so that landowners in a Mountain Access Area will not be subject to claims should recreational users become injured while on their land.

As these are mountain areas, recreational users should be appropriately skilled and equipped to look after themselves; there may not be either marked or developed trails on the mountain, other than where trail repair or construction is required to avoid environmental damage. This difference could be emphasised through describing the car parks as Mountain Access Points, rather than Trailheads.

The development and maintenance of defined Mountain Access Routes (to channel recreational users from the car-park to the open hillside) would be part of the Mountain Access Scheme in many areas. Many of these will already be popular informal access routes.

In addition to negotiation with public and private landowners, there will be early consultation with National Parks & Wildlife Service and the Office of Public Works to identify any environmentally or archaeologically sensitive points within proposed Mountain Access Areas, as this will have a bearing on the management of recreation activities.

4. Benefits to private landowners

The Mountain Access Scheme offers many benefits to landowners including:

- A mechanism to manage the increasing level of recreational activity on the Irish mountains, and a point of contact (RRO or farmers liaison officer) to deal with any problems which may arise for landowners.
- Full indemnity against any claims from recreational users who have become injured on the mountain.
- Development of car parks should prevent narrow roads and gateways being blocked by parked cars.
- Designated routes and off the hill should reduce damage to fences and loss of privacy which can arise when recreational users don't know where to go.
- Signage will make clear that the Mountain Access Area is used with the permission and goodwill of landowners and that recreational users should respect that goodwill, care for the environment and take responsibility for their own safety.
- In some situations there is scope for landowners to charge for parking or provide other services, as at Cronin's Yard in Kerry and King's Yard in the Galtees.
- Mountain Access Areas should attract recreational users, who will be encouraged to spend money in the area. This will help sustain local services such as shops and pubs for the benefit of local communities.
- Increases in tourist numbers and recreational activity should provide enhanced job creation and development potential in these areas

As part of the consultation process with private landowners about the Mountain Access Scheme, a range of low-impact recreation activities could be allowed for, not just walking and climbing. Permission for such additional activities would be dependent on local landowners in the first instance. It would also be contingent on responsible recreation, meaning respect for landowners and their activities, for the natural environment and for other recreational users, as set out in the Leave No Trace programme. For each Mountain Access Area it should be clear which recreation activities are permitted, which are not permitted and which require special permission and possibly licences, e.g. events involving large numbers.

5. Conclusion

There has been a significant growth in walking and other outdoor recreation activities in recent years, and there is a drive to maximise tourism revenue from the sector. Most outdoor recreation activities in Ireland take place on private land. Efforts are underway to increase the availability of State lands for such purposes also. The growth in these activities has increased pressure on private landowners and rural communities, highlighting the need for a framework for the management of recreation in the Irish countryside.

Comhairle na Tuaithe's pilot Mountain Access Scheme has the potential to develop into such a framework. The scheme addresses the landowners' key issues, and delivers certainty of access. This could be instrumental in moving to a situation where outdoor recreation in

Ireland is properly developed, managed and promoted, so as to maximise the potential of this sector, while minimising any negative impacts.