



Response to National Sports Policy Framework public consultation paper

1. Introduction

Mountaineering Ireland welcomes the development of the National Sports Policy Framework and the opportunity to respond to the public consultation paper. As the National Governing Body (NGB) for all aspects of walking and climbing, Mountaineering Ireland has a strong interest in national sports policy and the organisation is deeply aware of the contribution that sport and recreation makes to the physical and mental health and well-being of participants. Mountaineering Ireland has over 11,800 members, the majority of whom are affiliated through our 185 registered clubs. More than 85% of Mountaineering Ireland members regularly participate in hillwalking. Mountaineering Ireland also operates the 'Get Ireland Walking' programme which is supported by Sport Ireland and the Department of Health. There are currently 395 walking groups registered with Get Ireland Walking with participant numbers close to 10,000 members. However participation in the activities represented by Mountaineering Ireland is far higher than this, with the 2015 Irish Sports Monitor showing that 63.6% of those aged over 16 (approximately 2.25 million adults) walk regularly for recreation.

Mountaineering Ireland's interests are not limited to participation; the organisation has a Talent Development programme, with systems in place for identifying and developing talented young climbers and a broad range of competitions annually for indoor climbing. With the opening of a number of commercial climbing centres in the last five years this aspect of the sport is experiencing significant growth, which is set to continue as climbing is included as one of five new sports at the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

Due to time constraints Mountaineering Ireland's response to the consultation paper deals primarily with the chapter on Outdoor Recreation as this may not have been comprehensively addressed by other NGBs.

2. Outdoor Recreation (Chapter 14)

The Outdoor Recreation chapter shows considerable insight into this complex area of sport and recreation. The paper notes a number of policy issues, two of which Mountaineering Ireland believes to be key considerations which should be explained more fully:

Access

All land in Ireland, is either owned privately (>80%) or by the State (<20%). Although there is no legal right of entry to land for sport and recreation, the vast majority of rural landowners have traditionally granted access to upland areas as well as the general countryside. However, this goodwill and access could be withdrawn at any stage. This lack of certainty contrasts with most of Europe, where varying degrees of public access to land are formally defined.

The current growth in outdoor recreation activities such as walking, mountain-biking and running etc, combined with the success of the Wild Atlantic Way, is bringing ever greater pressure to bear on an unmanaged situation that relies on the goodwill of individual landowners. Tensions arising from visitor pressure on private land are becoming more common. Local development groups, Rural Recreation Officers and NGBs such as Mountaineering Ireland work quietly to address concerns with the aim of ensuring continued access, but the situation is barely managed and certainly not future-proofed.

It is important to consider that while Coillte and the National Parks & Wildlife Service operate an open access policy for pedestrian users, there is no legal right of access to State-owned land for sport and recreation, other than on land owned by Waterways Ireland. A number of State agencies have worked over the last five years to develop a plan for recreation on public lands. While welcome, this is largely a bid to secure funding for the management of recreation and does not include any proposal to include a legal right of access to publicly owned land. It is difficult to see how public access to private land can be improved without the State showing leadership by enshrining a right of public access to publicly-owned land for responsible recreation. This is an important dimension of the access issue and a policy issue which Mountaineering Ireland believes must be addressed.

A recent report on the Review of Comhairle na Tuaithe and the National Countryside Recreation Strategy* highlights that a wider application and increased resourcing of Comhairle's current permissive access model is required to sustain the growth in outdoor recreation activities.

The access solution currently being trialled in two areas through Comhairle's Pilot Mountain Access Project needs to be applied in other upland areas to properly test its feasibility. To do so the indemnity arrangement to underpin this model, which was agreed in principle by the State Claims Agency almost two years ago, first needs to be finalised.

It also needs to be verified if the permissive access model is capable of delivering improved access for recreation at lower levels in the countryside, and if it can deliver certainty of access to coastal areas, rivers, lakes and heritage sites. It is Mountaineering Ireland's firm belief that continued growth and Ireland's future potential in the area of outdoor recreation and tourism will only be achieved when access is addressed on this scale, with a simpler and much more proactive approach.

** This report has not yet been published but should be available from the Rural Recreation Section of the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs.*

Environmental protection

The natural landscapes which provide the inspiration and the place for outdoor recreation activities are often physically fragile. The quality of the environment and the quality of the recreational users' experience are inextricably linked and both can be diminished by inappropriate or excessive use. The inherent fragility of the environment and the fact that many areas are protected by nature conservation designations must be considered in the planning and development of outdoor recreation.

Allied to this is the need to protect the quality of Ireland's landscape. Fáilte Ireland's annual Visitor Attitudes Surveys consistently show that the friendliness of the people, the beautiful scenery and the natural, unspoilt environment are the main factors that influence overseas visitors in choosing Ireland as their holiday destination.

Undeveloped landscapes provide some of our most attractive scenery, much of it in upland areas. Ireland's very limited stock of undeveloped land is being used up at an alarming rate due to renewable

energy developments, afforestation, the erection of new fences and communications masts, the excavation of new tracks and other built development.

The small area of undeveloped upland landscape or wild land which remains in Ireland is a priceless national asset, the enjoyment of which for recreational uses, is vital to the physical, mental, recreational, emotional and spiritual well-being of the nation as a whole. It is Mountaineering Ireland's assertion that policy is required to protect this vital resource and ensure that it is used in a sustainable way.

Consultation questions

- a) Given the increasing popularity of participation in outdoor recreational activities, should sport policy focus on further increasing participation levels in this area and getting inactive people participating in physical activity?*

There is undoubted potential for outdoor recreation activities to get more inactive people participating in physical activity, and also to get occasional participants active on a more regular basis. The key policy issues of access and environmental protection must first be addressed, so as to ensure that the growth in participation is sustainable.

Developed and managed trails make it easy for people without skills or a high level of fitness to get involved in outdoor recreation activity. Research for the Irish Trails Strategy (2007) found that people who have access to trails increase their recreational activity on average by 44%. Experience through the Get Ireland Walking programme has also shown that a lack of suitable walking locations is a constraint to participation, particularly in rural areas. A national, low level, trail network is needed so that all communities have access to quality off-road walking experiences.

The impact of increased numbers walking in the uplands and other fragile environments is increasingly evident through worsening path erosion on popular routes. Investment is required to build the necessary skills and undertake the repair work that is needed to prevent further degradation of the environment due to the growth in activity participation. Policymakers should be cognisant of the need to match the increased participation in outdoor recreation and activity tourism with a greater investment in protecting the resource base that supports this activity.

In addition, there is also a need to invest in the 'soft' infrastructure that enables this activity, through support for NGBs, Local Sports Partnerships and other actors to motivate people, increase their skill levels, and encourage better practice so as to ensure safe and responsible participation in outdoor activity.

Overall strategic investment in outdoor recreation is necessary so as to release the potential within the sector, but also to protect the natural resource base that all of this activity is dependent upon.

- b) Given the diverse range of policy issues involved in outdoor recreation, what formal structure needs to be put in place to best support both the implementation and accountability of a cross-Government policy in this area across a range of government departments, statutory and other bodies?*

Mountaineering Ireland supports the recommendations in the *Review of Comhairle na Tuaithe and the National Countryside Recreation Strategy* for an integrated structure to support the development and management of outdoor recreation in Ireland.

The report notes that the existing Comhairle na Tuaithe structures and approach, while a step in the right direction, are insufficient and need to be revised, and also that a new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy is required to guide the growth of the outdoor recreation sector nationally and to inform local plans and activities.

In terms of structure, the report recommends a high level Outdoor Recreation Council; an interdepartmental working group; a lead Department or shared leadership; a permanent committee on recreational access and an Outdoor Recreation Consultative Forum.

Mountaineering Ireland is supportive of the structures proposed, however we believe there should be a lead department for outdoor recreation, rather than a shared lead. Implementation of *Our Great Outdoors – the Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for Northern Ireland* has been stalled for almost three years due to not having an agreed lead partner between the three departments which developed that strategy.

There is obvious merit in the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs taking the lead as the Rural Recreation Section currently sits within this department and it is also the department with responsibility for the natural environment, however the recent review notes that the pace of progress has been slow and the Rural Recreation Section has not achieved cross-departmental influence. It is Mountaineering Ireland's view that there is an equally strong case for moving the rural (or outdoor) recreation function to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTS) so that it aligns with sport and tourism. The overall profile of DTTS would seem to fit better with the objectives of the outdoor recreation sector.

Regardless of which department takes the lead, Mountaineering Ireland endorses the view in the report on the review of Comhairle na Tuaithe that Comhairle requires more autonomy and resources if it is to drive an outdoor recreation development agenda. Mountaineering Ireland welcomes the recommendation in the report for the appointment of an Outdoor Recreation Development Manager to provide technical assistance to the high level body, and support the development and delivery of the outdoor recreation strategy.

Clearly it is the role of the ministers and the senior civil servants within these departments to negotiate an appropriate arrangement; Mountaineering Ireland's principal concern is that the outdoor recreation sector requires policy support and strong leadership in the period ahead.

c) Are there additional opportunities to promote participation in adventure activities and outdoor sports to overseas visitors?

It should be noted in Chapter 15 Sports Tourism that Walking is by far the most popular activity amongst overseas visitors with Fáilte Ireland research showing that 1,193,000 visitors engaged in hiking or walking as part of their holiday in 2014. These visitors had an overall spend of €915 million. The next most popular activity was cycling with 286,000 visitors and a spend of €268 million.

The Wild Atlantic Way is a key vehicle for promoting participation in adventure activities amongst overseas visitors and Fáilte Ireland seems to be working well with activity providers. However the Wild

Atlantic Way proposition of discovery, and its goal of directing visitors to less-visited areas, are exerting pressure on a largely unmanaged access situation. As referenced earlier, a landowner's goodwill could easily be exhausted where field gates are blocked by parked vehicles, fences and walls are damaged, or commercial activity providers operate without the landowner's permission. The key policy issues of securing access and protecting the environment are therefore essential to ensuring the quality of future visitor experiences.

In terms of additional opportunities to promote participation in adventure activities, this aspect of the tourism offering is not currently being actively promoted by Fáilte Ireland for the midlands and the eastern part of the country, despite the fact that rural communities are all keen to develop and promote their offering to activity visitors. Activity tourism brings visitors to remote rural areas, and where ancillary services such as food and accommodation are available, brings valuable economic benefit to these areas.

d) Are there other challenges and issues that need to be addressed in this area?

The primary policy requirement is the need to develop a new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy which:

- Includes measures to secure and improve access to the outdoors for responsible recreation;
- Acknowledges the value of outdoor recreation to people's health and to our economy;
- Is underpinned by a commitment to protect the natural environment;
- Is implemented by a specialist unit within the lead Department, complemented by a new Outdoor Recreation Council and an inter-departmental working group and is properly resourced.

In addition to a new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, there will be need for a local Outdoor Recreation Development Plan for each county, reflecting the vision and objectives of the national strategy.

Future policy and investment should ensure a greater focus on providing quality outdoor recreation opportunities that are geographically balanced to meet the needs of the Irish population; to date much of the investment in trails and other outdoor recreation infrastructure has been related to tourism initiatives and located more so in the western part of the country.

The quality of outdoor recreation experiences will be enhanced by ensuring that any infrastructure provided is sympathetic to its setting and appropriate to the needs of the user group. As with addressing path erosion, there is a need to develop skills and standards in this area.

The Visitor Safety in Countryside Group (VCSG) principles, which have been endorsed by a number of State agencies in Ireland, provide excellent guidance on how to create safe access to the countryside in ways that do not spoil the landscape and heritage, or lessen the visitor's sense of exploration and adventure. It would be welcome to see the VSCG approach embedded in national outdoor recreation policy.

3. Participation (Chapter 2)

The Irish Sports Monitor shows recreational walking to be the most popular physical activity amongst adults in Ireland, yet the Sport vs Physical Activity section (p13 of consultation document) implies that

recreational walking is not considered sport but another means of physical activity. It is Mountaineering Ireland's view that policy should recognise recreational walking as part of recreational sport.

The consultation document makes clear that the Ministers' high-level goal is for sport to contribute to a healthier and more active society, and that all members of society will have the opportunity to participate in sport at all levels. To make meaningful progress towards those goals recreational walking should be considered within the scope of the policy framework, perhaps by re-titling it as a Sports and Recreation Policy Framework. Sport does not seem to be defined in the consultation document; it would be helpful to do so.

Analysis of the Irish Sports Monitor shows that recreational walking makes a significant contribution to the likelihood of meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines with over four times as many walkers meeting the Guidelines than those who don't walk. The higher participation in recreational walking amongst women, older adults, full-time homemakers, retired people and the unemployed also makes recreational walking something of an equaliser in narrowing the social gradients that exist in terms of the overall likelihood of people meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines.

When considered against the exchequer investment through the Department of Health (which is almost entirely an investment in illness care) there is a very strong case for increased investment in sport and recreation for the benefits it delivers in terms of personal well-being and long-term healthcare savings.

4. Further information

Mountaineering Ireland would be happy to elaborate on, or discuss, any of the ideas contained in this submission.

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