



Proposed Bill on Access to the Countryside

Labour TD, Robert Dowds is planning to put a Private Members Bill, on Access to the Countryside before the Houses of the Oireachtas during 2013. Mountaineering Ireland welcomes anything that brings greater certainty and improved access for Ireland's hillwalkers and climbers, and in that context is pleased to see fresh debate on this issue. Mountaineering Ireland has strongly recommended Mr. Dowds to have a full engagement with the main representative bodies for farmers. Anything less would undermine the goodwill extended to hillwalkers and climbers by Ireland's hillfarmers and potentially result in access closures.

The vast majority of private landowners in mountain areas freely allow recreational use of their land. Public enjoyment of the countryside for recreation, whether based on a legal framework or not, will always rely on co-operation between a range of stakeholders including private and public landowners, recreation groups, the public, tourism providers and community interests. With appropriate support and investment, our growing outdoor recreation sector will deliver not only significant health and well-being benefits to participants, but also social and much-needed economic contributions to rural communities.

The policy of Mountaineering Ireland is that we are actively seeking reasonable access to unenclosed mountain and coastal areas and a network of paths allowing for access to these areas for responsible users. Mountaineering Ireland fully recognises landowners' rights. The membership of Mountaineering Ireland has no wish to wander on arable or improved land, go through farmyards or walk past farmers' front doors. It is the freedom of the hills we seek, not blind alleys of confrontation.

Mountaineering Ireland has worked alongside the members of Comhairle na Tuaithe (the Countryside Council) since its formation almost a decade ago. Comhairle na Tuaithe has provided a useful forum to bring stakeholders together and build trust and co-operation. However, Mountaineering Ireland is concerned that in the last two years there has been little progress on Comhairle na Tuaithe's Mountain Access project. The two Mountain Access pilots have not been completed and an indemnity scheme critical to the project's viability has yet to be delivered. This lack of progress suggests little political interest in this vital aspect of our nation's recreation and tourism sectors.

The Dowds Bill is very similar to his Labour Party colleague, Minister Ruairí Quinn's Bill (2007), with some additions including access along river banks, lake shores and the coast. In

2007 Mountaineering Ireland welcomed the Quinn Bill. Mountaineering Ireland has suggested that Mr. Dowds examine why the 2007 Quinn Bill was not progressed.

Key principles

Legislation alone will never address the recreation management issues that exist. Mountaineering Ireland believes that the following principles are key for sustainable outdoor recreation in Ireland:

- Co-ordination of countryside access to be the responsibility of a representative national structure, a properly functioning and resourced Comhairle na Tuaithe that benefits from strong political support;
- An up-to-date Strategy for Outdoor Recreation in Ireland;
- Recognition that Ireland's natural environment is limited in its extent and inherently fragile and that recreational enjoyment of these areas must be underpinned by a commitment to responsible and sustainable practice;
- A statutory right of access on foot to all publicly-owned land;
- A national, low level, trail network so that all communities have access to off-road walking;
- An access route network connecting public roads and car parks to unenclosed hill and coastal land. These could be permissive paths, leased paths or public rights of way;
- A legal framework for access to open, unenclosed uplands and coastal areas where there are either minimal or no active farming practices apart from rough grazing. This legal framework will ensure that there is no liability on the landowner for recreational users;
- Appropriate measures through the Rural Development Programme (Common Agricultural Policy reform) to focus payments to hillfarmers for the sustainable management of the landscapes they own. (This is being pursued through the National Uplands Working Group, which Mountaineering Ireland is a member of.);
- A considered and quality approach to erosion management on upland paths, guided by a national set of Upland Path Principles, promoted through an Upland Path Network (see www.helpingthehills.ie);
- Rural Recreation Officers employed in local authority areas, especially those with uplands, to contribute to the planning and management of outdoor recreation in their area.

The proposed Bill on Access will be discussed at the members' forum at the Mountaineering Ireland Spring Gathering and Annual General Meeting in Gartan Outdoor Education Centre, 9th March 2013.

3/3/2013.