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The lead agency for the development of sport in Northern Ireland

REVIEW

COUNTRYSIDE RECREATION STRATEGY



The lead agency for the development of sport in Northern Ireland

BACKGROUND

The NI Countryside Recreation Strategy was authored and developed in 1998 by Sport Northern Ireland and the Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment (now Northern Ireland Environment Agency - NIEA).

The vision of the 1998 Strategy was to: “To develop and sustain a vibrant countryside recreation culture in which responsible and well informed people enjoy high quality, sustainable and appropriate activities in an accessible, well managed yet challenging environment; where landowners and managers are welcoming and there are accompanying benefits to local communities both in social and economic terms.”

There were three principles underpinning this vision:

- Mutual respect between all interested parties;
- Sustainable access; and
- Quality of the experience.

In March 2009, Sport Northern Ireland and NIEA commissioned Outplan Ireland Ltd. to carry out an independent review of 1998 Strategy. This was completed in June 2009.

The assignment fell into three stages:

- 1.** A review of the impact of the 1998 Strategy in realising its vision;
- 2.** A review of the impact of the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN) in implementing the Strategy; and
- 3.** Recommendations for future action.

In conducting this review Outplan engaged with a wide range of stakeholders including staff members from relevant organisations, users of the countryside and landowners including Sport Northern Ireland, NIEA, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), Ulster Farmers Union, Forest Service, Governing Bodies, Local Authority Countryside Officers, etc. A variety of techniques were utilised including interviews, focus groups and questionnaires.

The 1998 Strategy had proposed a number of Action Programmes to realise the Vision. The first was the establishment of ‘Management Structures’ and the key structure proposed and established was the CAAN with the aim of “co-ordinating the views of all countryside recreation bodies, statutory agencies, environmental bodies, landowner representatives and other appropriate groups”. This was set up in 1999 and alongside it Countryside Recreation Northern Ireland (CRNI) was also established. This is the parent company and a registered charity, which employs staff and draws down funding to deliver projects and products on behalf of the Network.

The report has illustrated that there is some clarity and distinction required between the Countryside Access and Activity Network (CAAN) often known as ‘The Network’ and CRNI. In a number of instances, references by respondents are made to CAAN – when they were actually referring to CRNI and vice versa. The term ‘CAAN’ has become synonymous with both of these intrinsically linked bodies – and so some change to ensure greater clarity may be required in the future.

FINDINGS

Based on the questionnaire responses and interviews, the review team structured the report to provide a number of critical considerations, key conclusions, lessons learned and recommendations. However, before analysing these conclusions it is worth examining the responses from the questionnaires.

Respondents were asked how they viewed the importance of countryside recreation and Table 1 below illustrates their responses:

TABLE 1

IMPORTANCE OF COUNTRYSIDE RECREATION				
Very Important	Highly Important	Of Some Importance	Of Little Importance	Not Important
47%	30%	23%	0%	0%

73% of these respondents were from the public sector - particularly local authorities and this indicates a strong degree of reassurance that countryside recreation is, for the most part, an important aspect of their work.

TABLE 2

READ OR SEEN THE 1998 COUNTRYSIDE RECREATION STRATEGY		
Read	Seen	Neither
30%	43%	27%

While 73% had either seen or read the 1998 Countryside Recreation Strategy a significant number had not. It would be expected that this would correlate directly with those who had indicated that Countryside Recreation was only of some importance but this was not the case as a number of the respondents who felt that Countryside Recreation was very important had neither seen nor read the 1998 strategy. However, over the past 10 years most of the local authority access officers have changed and the new officers in post may not have been informed or made aware of the strategy.

TABLE 3

WAS THE VISION OF THE 1998 STRATEGY REALISED?		
Yes	No	Partly
13%	4%	83%

As can be seen in Table 3 a very significant proportion of the respondents felt that the 1998 Strategy had only been partly realised. A recurring theme as to why this was the case was the issue of an 'accessible environment'. The fact that the Access Legislation in Northern Ireland has a lower standing than England and Wales which have the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW) 2000 Act or Scotland which has the Land Reform Act 2002 was often commented on. A further issue was the perceived difficulties that landowners have with the Occupiers Liability Legislation.

The Network (CAAN) was established 10 years ago and respondents were asked to comment on how successful they felt it had been in achieving its aims.

TABLE 4

SUCCESS OF CAAN "THE NETWORK"			
Very Successful	Successful	Limited Success	Little Success
30%	60%	10%	0%

The respondents very clearly intimated that the Network has been invaluable for co-ordinating views, disseminating information and providing education for all the relevant countryside recreation bodies, and that CRNI has been extremely effective at delivering products and developing information that enhance opportunities for Countryside Recreation.

Three sub-groups of the network have evolved over the past 10 years which are:

1. Countryside Recreation Group (District Council Countryside Officers);
2. Northern Ireland Outdoor Learning Group; and
3. Activity Tourism Forum.

Respondents were asked to comment on the usefulness of these groups, if they were involved in them.

TABLE 5

USEFULNESS OF SUB-GROUPS		
Yes	No	Limited
75%	0%	25%



ISSUES & CONSIDERATIONS

The information in section 4 has indicated that the 1998 Strategy has had a significant impact on the development of Outdoor Recreation.

However the report from Outplan has highlighted recurring comments from respondents regarding a number of issues that must be taken into account before progressing with developing a new Strategy or Action Plan for Outdoor Recreation.

There are a number of actions from those envisaged in the original 1998 Strategy that have not been achieved including the anticipated changes to Occupiers Liability Legislation, the development of policy frameworks by some Government Departments and a comprehensive natural facilities database.

There is a perception issue around CRNI as it has been regarded in some quarters as having a focus on 'adrenaline' sports and a consequently young, middle class and mobile sector of society. The development of the 'Venture Outdoors' project is likely to go some way to alleviate this perception.

The role of the Countryside Access Liaison Group (CALG - an interdepartmental working group whose function is to develop policy and strategy) is not clear and lacks commitment from some agencies.

There are implications of the trend away from formal club/team activities to informal, individual/social group activities especially with respect to disseminating best practice.

Funding for countryside recreation and in particular CRNI to deliver on aspects of the strategy has proved to be difficult as often timescales from different funding bodies are very mismatched.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The involvement and support of a range of Government Departments and in particular public agencies with land management responsibilities is critical in the ongoing development of outdoor recreation.
- Outdoor recreation creates many opportunities for improving societal health, well-being and social cohesion, and this needs to be recognised and developed by the member organisations of CALG and further at Assembly level.
- The changing and emerging role of Local Government, post RPA, needs to be fully considered and greater opportunities taken at a local and community level especially given the proposed new powers of 'community planning'.
- There is a clear lack of 'recreation demand' data and related research to provide justification for policies, programmes and investments. This should be addressed to allow proper and considered arguments and decisions to be made.
- There is a need to continue to identify and develop research to develop a sound evidence base for subsequent progress on a new Outdoor Recreation Strategy.
- There is a need to reconcile current and growing conflicts between activities that use the natural environment on the one hand and the desire to manage and sustain them on the other.
- Consideration should be given at the Northern Ireland Executive level as to issuing a Policy Statement on the importance of Outdoor Recreation emanating from the statement on health and well-being already included in the 'Programme for Government'.
- Consideration needs to be given to the establishment of a National Access Forum with clear Terms of Reference to deal with specific access and relevant legal issues.

CONCLUSIONS

'Sport Matters' - the Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation in Northern Ireland which has been adopted by the Northern Ireland Executive provides the strategic framework to any developments towards a new 'strategy' or 'action plan' for Countryside Recreation for the next 10 years.

It is clear from the review that the 1998 Strategy has had a significant impact on the development of Countryside Recreation in Northern Ireland over the past 10 years. However, in a constantly changing society it is important that the vision and aims of the strategy continue to be up to date and relevant.

There are a number of issues and perceptions regarding access and occupiers liability which remain unresolved. There is clearly an identified need for continued advocacy for increased access to the countryside for outdoor recreation.

