

Consultation feedback

Our Great Outdoors – The Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for Northern Ireland.

Name (optional)	Karl Boyle	Organisation	Mountaineering Ireland
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Content of the Action Plan

1. Does the Action Plan reflect the key issues that you believe are fundamental to developing Outdoor Recreation in Northern Ireland?

The draft Action Plan certainly reflects many of the issues and challenges which must be addressed to build a dynamic culture of outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland, but there are some issues that Mountaineering Ireland believes should have greater emphasis:

1. **Political support** will be required to deliver the Vision in this plan. This support should be expressed in the document with a Minister's foreword and by having the Minister launch the plan. It should be further enhanced through a statement as to the importance of outdoor recreation from the First Minister and an onus on the relevant Departments to facilitate progress.

2. There should be a **lead body** for delivery of this plan; it is difficult to see how progress can be made without a dedicated driving force. Given Sport NI's lead role in the development of this plan, the obvious lead body would be a strengthened Outdoor Recreation Unit within Sport NI.

Another option might be the NIEA. Although NIEA has powers with regard to recreation and access under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order (1985) and the Access Order (1983), NIEA appears to currently have little direct involvement in such matters.

On a practical level there is no 'go to' body for outdoor recreation matters – e.g. what's the process for a community looking to develop a walking trail or where do you get information on liability issues? Local authorities are likely to have a central role, and whilst it is not yet clear what that will be following local government reorganisation, there is little reference to them or their role in the plan.

3. **Supporting participation** – Mountaineering Ireland was surprised to see so little emphasis in the Plan on the role of NGBs and clubs in encouraging and supporting participation in outdoor recreation activities.

NGBs have a great deal more potential to deliver life-long participation in outdoor recreation than commercial activity providers. Enthusiasts within NGBs and clubs give low cost access to activities and provide a conduit for transmitting positive values to new entrants to the sport.

Mountaineering Ireland would like to see an additional action included to increase capacity within NGBs to assist club development and

renewal, support volunteers within clubs and engage with informal groups and individual participants so as to deliver responsible, long-term participation in outdoor recreation.

4. **Funding** – Further to the need for political support identified in 1 above, there is also a need for Government to lead investment in outdoor recreation; the healthcare savings alone would justify this. A clear commitment by Government to part-fund this plan would help in leveraging funding from other sources.

The comments preceding the Funding Actions mention that funding is crucial for the development and maintenance of 'infrastructure'. While infrastructure is required in places, often what is needed is capital investment to protect the natural environment from the impact of recreational activity, e.g. to repair eroded upland paths. There is also need for current investment in areas such as recreation management.

5. **Access** - Undoubtedly the greatest barrier to the achievement of the vision in the Outdoor Recreation Action Plan is the difficulty, and lack of clarity, regarding access to the countryside. The failure of the 1983 Access Order to deliver a reasonable network of public rights of way and public paths, as well as improved access to open country, must be addressed as a priority. While difficult to prove, it is likely that the desire for more recreation facilities that emerged in the consultation process in part reflects the poor availability of access to the Northern Ireland countryside; the pattern of recreation activity would probably be quite different with better access.
6. **Care for the environment** – Although there are references within the plan to sustainability, environmental responsibility etc, there is a strong sense that the environment is seen as a resource and a tourism product. There should be greater emphasis on the fact that the natural environment is finite in its extent and inherently fragile. Every action in the plan should be proofed for its impact on the natural environment and wild or semi-wild landscapes.

Mountaineering Ireland would like to see the word 'protecting' included in the third point within the Vision, to help recreational users appreciate their responsibility towards the environment, this might work best as '...play their part in protecting, maintaining and enhancing that environment.'

7. **Training** – It is Mountaineering Ireland's view that there is a theme missing from Section 6. There is no reference in this section to the spirit of outdoor recreation – the values of adventure and self-reliance – and the need for further development of the training and award schemes within outdoor recreation activities. These form the enabling framework upon which a sustainable culture of outdoor recreation can be built, e.g. they underpin Adventuremark accreditation. NGBs have a key role in providing this framework and ensuring that it operates effectively. It is also strange that the plan makes no mention of the role of the National Outdoor Training Centre. Mountaineering Ireland believes this area requires further consideration and we would be willing to contribute to the identification of actions to deliver on this theme.

8. Are there any changes that you feel need to be made to the detailed actions? Please highlight any specific sections to which your comments relate.

General comments on actions:

- There are many actions within the plan that would benefit from NGB involvement, however the partner column seems to include no reference to NGBs or to the proposed National Forum.
- The timescales for actions need to be updated.

Specific comments:

A1 – There is need for senior representation from all partners and staff support (see 2 above) if the SORG is to be effective and particularly to address the policy and legislation actions. It would also be healthy to have NGB input to the SORG to ensure there is a focus on recreation, not just activity tourism. It might be possible to address this by having representatives from the National Forum on the SORG.

A2 – Mountaineering Ireland would like to see further detail included on this action. The National Forum might better be referred to as the National Outdoor Recreation Forum.

D1 – Mountaineering Ireland suggests the wording of the action be expanded to include access and land ownership.

D7 - This action needs further explanation. Mountaineering Ireland would be concerned about any proposal that brings additional signage into the natural environment.

D9 – It is suggested this action is re-worded to read ‘...demonstrate compliance regarding safety, quality of provision and care for the environment’. Mountaineering Ireland also believes that an environmental responsibility strand should be incorporated within Adventuremark accreditation.

E4 – The National Trails Office has developed classification and management standards for waymarked trails. It might be possible to save effort by adopting or adapting some of this work.

G2 – Mountaineering Ireland suggests including justice savings, (see www.laureus.com for figures on justice savings arising from investment in sport).

Mountaineering Ireland recommends an additional research action to progress a research agenda to better understand recreational behaviour and the impacts of recreation activity.

9. Do you believe that the suggested structures will help to give a clearer voice for change and developments on a local and national level?

There is need for political support and a lead body for delivery of this plan. Further detail is required on the National Forum. The emphasis on joint working is welcome, but this should extend further with elaboration of the role of local authorities and NGBs.

Structure of the Action Plan

10. Is the document clear in its structure and easy to understand?

It would be useful to include a definition of outdoor recreation. Mountaineering Ireland is concerned that this document, and others published recently in Northern Ireland, are leaning increasingly towards activity tourism rather than outdoor recreation.

The document is succinct, particularly given the breadth of issues covered, however there are a number of lists that overlap, but don't seem to relate directly to each other:

e.g.

- Three deliverables in Section 1
- Three outcomes within the Vision
- Three benefits in Section 2

And also:

- Six key themes in Section 6
- Seven sets of actions in Section 7

Clearer, logical alignment throughout the document would aid understanding and should make the document stronger. Further detail is required within some of the Recommended Actions.

11. Does the language used provide clear information in plain English?

Yes, the language is clear, however we would suggest adding a list of abbreviations.

12. The final document will contain a lot more photos and case studies. Can you provide any photos or short (max 300 words) case studies on relevant topics highlighted within the plan?

Women With Altitude case study and photographs to follow.

Do you have any other comments?

Mountaineering Ireland would welcome an opportunity to discuss this submission and agree how our organisation can contribute to building a dynamic culture of sustainable outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland.