

A Manifesto to unlock the potential of Scotland's iconic Long Distance Routes

Why we need Scotland's Long Distance Routes

The four designated Long Distance Routes (LDRs), in Scotland give millions of people each year access to around 500 miles of some of the most nature-diverse and culturally important landscapes in the country. The West Highland Way, Speyside Way, Great Glen Way and Southern Upland Way between them cross Scotland's two National Parks and several National Scenic Areas, over 50 protected nature sites, and approximately 70 listed heritages sites.

As well as being important cultural and nature sites in themselves, these four designated LDRs are central to Scotland's economy, forming the backbone of the £1.26 billion contribution outdoor access makes to the economy annually.

Why does their potential remain untapped?

However, while Scotland has in some ways made great strides for access, as the only nation in the UK to have a right of responsible access enshrined in law, the huge potential of the designated LDRs remains largely untapped on these routes. Research consistently shows that most of the population, especially people from ethnic minority groups, those with long term illness and those with accessibility needs, prefer the security of well-marked, well-maintained paths. These are key qualities of the designated LDRs, or at least they should be.

Since Scottish Government made the policy decision in 2010 not to designate any more LDRs, successive administrations appear to have let these routes 'fend for themselves' or forgotten that this designation, and these amazing routes, exist. They have not recognised the important role these iconic routes could play in delivering access to the outdoors for the people of Scotland and beyond, and to the Scottish economy, if they were properly maintained and improved, and considered as part of a wider access strategy.

Our three manifesto asks

There are three steps that could be taken which would enable Scotland to unlock the full potential of the designated Long Distance Routes.

- Firstly, making explicit the implicit statutory duty for local authorities and National Park Authorities to maintain Long Distance Routes
- Secondly, providing NatureScot with ringfenced funding for projects to improve the designated Long Distance Routes
- Finally, delivery of a new Long Distance Routes strategy that will make sure these culturally and economically important routes are made fit for the future.

National Trails UK is the independent champion for the 20 National Trails and designated LDRs in Scotland, Wales and England. We strengthen the National Trails and LDRs, advocate on their behalf, and inspire more people from all backgrounds to use the network.

Policy Ask 1: An explicit statutory duty for Local Authorities and National Park Authorities to maintain designated Long Distance Routes

The LDRs in Scotland were created under provisions made by the Countryside (Scotland) Act 1967. However, whilst a duty to maintain such routes is implied by the legislation, it is not fully explicit. As a result, different authorities are interpreting this duty differently, and some sections of designated Long Distance Routes are seriously degrading. By making the duty explicit, the Scottish Government will be ensuring that there is a level footing for all authorities working hard to maintain and improve these important routes.

Policy Ask 2: Designated funding through NatureScot for projects to improve the designated Long Distance Routes

The four designated LDRs have each identified impactful maintenance and improvement projects which would make them more accessible to a wider range of people. However, securing that funding is hugely challenging as there is nothing available specific to the designated LDRs.

Very few sections would ever be eligible for Active Travel funding, as the routes are by nature predominantly off-road and rural, traversing some of Scotland's most beautiful, wild and topographically varied rural landscapes. As such, the majority of the LDR network cannot meet technical active travel specification, and only certain sections could be used for everyday journeys.

Furthermore, the authorities through whose areas the LDRs pass, especially local authorities, do not have the strategic overview of the whole of each designated LDR to be able to make strategic decisions about which projects would deliver the best value for money. Some pass through as many as three different local authorities.

We strongly recommend that NatureScot receive designated funding for projects along the designated LDRs. This could initially be a 3-year test and trial, to explore the best way in which to deliver projects which improve access to a wider range of people, as well as delivering for nature. This test and trial could then be evaluated in 2028/29 to inform the creation of a longer-term fund for designated LDRs.

Policy Ask 3: A Strategy for Long Distance Routes

When LDRs were first designated, the aim then was to provide people with the opportunities for long distance journeys away from roads and to explore some of Scotland's most beautiful and remote landscapes.

However, since the introduction of the right of responsible access, the role of designated LDRs has largely been forgotten, and there has been no work to include designated LDRs in relevant policies. Indeed, the designated LDRs deliver benefits for rural economies, health and wellbeing, heritage, tourism, and climate resilience but are currently absent from central policies in these areas.

We are calling for a Strategy for designated LDRs; bringing together key stakeholders from the LDRs alongside civil servants and access professionals, to determine how to deliver the full potential of LDRs and how to support that delivery.

This could include:

- Further updates to the original 1967 Countryside (Scotland) Act OR a new act, covering what LDRs are / should deliver for the public
- Reviewing the decision to not designate any new LDRs
- Coordinated updates of key policies in tourism, heritage, planning, rural economy and climate resilience to include designated LDRs
- Ensure all LDRs are subject to Section 19 powers under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003.
- Explicit reference to the protection of LDRs in forestry policy, especially regarding the width of the path in harvest and tree replanting
- Specific protection of designated LDRs in planning policy

The next steps...

The designated LDRs are iconic routes that can deliver multiple benefits across tourism, health and wellbeing, rural economies, heritage, planning and climate resilience. National Trails UK is excited to work with Scottish Government and champions across Holyrood to support these iconic routes to deliver their full potential. By delivering these three manifesto asks, we can ensure that the positive impacts of designated LDRs will continue for generations to come.