

Invitation to Tender – Paths to Inclusion Research Partner

Introduction and Project Overview

We are seeking a research partner to support the Research, Scoping and Pilot phase of NTUK's *Paths to Inclusion* project. The research partner will co-design and deliver a programme of research that will inform how NTUK and our delivery partners can create and deliver inclusive, engaging, accessible and user-led content — enabling more people from underrepresented communities to access and enjoy National Trails.

About National Trails and National Trails UK (NTUK)

The National Trails comprise 21 long-distance routes across England, Wales, and Scotland, covering over 5,000 miles and managed through partnerships, local authorities, and organisations. A full list is available [here](#). 'National Trails' is a marketing name used by the routes in England and Wales; in Scotland they are known as designated long-distance routes (LDRs).

In England and Wales, each National Trail is overseen by its own National Trails Partnership, and they receive funding from central government for annual repair and maintenance to keep the National Trails up to quality standards. This funding also includes a contribution to a National Trail Officer, who manages the repair and maintenance work. You can find out more about this in [The New Deal](#) and [the Welsh quality standards](#).

In Scotland, each local authority/ National Park with a designated LDR passes through manages their own section. The exception to this is the West Highland Way; a new charity, the West Highland Way Trust, has been set up to coordinate fundraising and projects along the whole route.

National Trails UK, (NTUK), is a charity created by the National Trails themselves. We are the independent champion for the 21 designated long-distance routes in England, Wales and Scotland. We exist to strengthen them, advocate on their behalf, and inspire more different people to use them.

Our Vision: A network of high quality, nature-rich National Trails which are highly valued and used by everyone.

Our Mission: To strengthen the UK's National Trails so they can sustainably deliver more for people and nature, advocate on their behalf, and inspire more people to use them as a gateway to the great outdoors.

Our pillars: Strengthen, advocate, inspire and organisational resilience

Context

A growing body of research - including the 2019 Landscapes Review - highlights the persistent lack of diversity among those accessing Protected Landscapes. Many people, particularly those from minoritised ethnic communities, disabled people, and both younger and older age groups, often feel excluded or unable to access countryside spaces. A 2022 Defra review identified several ongoing barriers to equitable access - including low awareness, poor-quality access information, and a lack of representation in communications.

National Trails have a key role to play in addressing these inequalities, by offering highly managed, accessible routes and targeted engagement programmes that aim to welcome underserved communities. However, while Equity, Diversity and Inclusion projects have seen success at a local level, there is currently no consistent or joined-up approach across the UK to address the root causes of underrepresentation across the National Trails. For example, there is no central resource or 'point of truth' that showcases the diversity of experiences National Trails offer, or explains how to access them. Many in the National Trails workforce also lack the resources, training or confidence to co-create and share inclusive, engaging content with their target audiences.

To address this, we are working with National Trail Officers and partners to develop a strategic approach to the national promotion and interpretation of National Trails, and to develop the joined-up approach that has been missing. At the heart of our approach is a commitment to tackling access barriers at their source by co-creating content and campaigns with target communities, and sharing power with those who have lived and professional experience of the physical, cultural, social or economic barriers that limit access to nature.

About the Project

This research forms part of *Paths to Inclusion*, a new NTUK-led initiative that aims to inspire and empower more people to connect with the wide-ranging social and economic benefits of National Trails. Specifically, *Paths to Inclusion* will explore how NTUK can collaborate with National Trails, our partners and diverse communities to co-design and deliver inspiring, inclusive and

accessible content that empowers and enables underrepresented groups to experience National Trails.

Paths to Inclusion builds on our 2024 Defra-funded *Language of Access* project, which developed a framework for Protected Landscapes to present access information consistently, as well as decades of experience and local solutions delivered by National Trails and their host authorities (National Parks, National Landscapes and Local Authorities).

Using money raised by National Lottery players, the National Lottery Heritage Fund supports projects that connect people and communities with the UK's heritage. Thanks to National Lottery players, we have been able to fund this key project, ensuring the National Trails are welcoming places for all.

About the Audience

The project will focus on two main audience groups:

1. People from minoritised ethnic communities (specifically East and Southeast Asian communities, and people of Black ethnicity)
2. People with disabilities

We are working with 4 Delivery Partners, each representing one sub-group.

Specifically, we want to reach:

- People who are not currently visiting National Trails, but might be open to visiting, given the right information and support
- People who occasionally visit, but do not feel it is a space for them

In this project, we will explore the effectiveness of similar existing projects, understand the needs of our target audiences, test approaches through pilot projects, and produce practical recommendations and a replicable model. Specifically, we will:

1. Identify best-practice models and examples from within the National Trail network and the wider sector
2. Explore the content and communication needs and preferences of target audiences
3. Assess the current knowledge, skills and capacity among delivery partners (including National Trail Officers, government agencies, content creators and community representatives) to create inclusive, user-led content
4. Collaboratively co-design and test pilot content and approaches with target audiences and delivery partners

5. Use insights to:
 - a. Develop clear, practical recommendations for NTUK and the National Trails network
 - b. Produce a blueprint for the wider sector to undertake similar work

Research Objectives and Role of Partner

The Research Partner will undertake the following research:

1. **Best-practice examples.** This should consist of desk-based research of inclusive content and engagement approaches, both past and present, from across the National Trails network and the wider outdoor, heritage and cultural sectors.
2. **Understanding target audience groups.** This research should explore their awareness, perceptions, motivations, content preferences, and the barriers and opportunities related to accessing the pilot National Trails. Suggested methods include focus groups, workshops, user surveys and/or interviews. However, we expect the research partner to work with NTUK's 4 project Delivery Partners to recommend the most appropriate methodology.

Participants may be recruited through:

- NTUK's current Delivery Partners
- A commissioned panel provider
- Other methods recommended by the research partner

3. **Skills audit of content creators.** The research should include light-touch engagement with National Trail staff and other official National Trail content creators (such as relevant staff within government agencies, guide/travel writers and outdoor publications), to:
 - a. Understand their current capacity, confidence, skills and tools for creating and sharing inclusive content.
 - b. Identify opportunities and constraints that may affect the implementation of potential content solutions.

Participants for this research may include:

- National Trail Officers at pilot sites
- Government agency staff
- External National Trail content creators such as guide writers and travel companies.

The research partner will work closely with the project team and delivery partners to iteratively design and test content ideas and engagement approaches.

Outputs

The research partner will work with the project team to produce two core outputs:

1. **Recommendations Report for NTUK and the National Trails network:** A practical report outlining clear, evidence-based recommendations for NTUK and its delivery partners. This will set out next steps for designing and delivering inclusive content and campaigns that can be scaled across the wider National Trails network.
2. **National Trails Blueprint for the Wider Sector:** A concise, user-friendly resource for other organisations in the access, heritage and outdoor sectors. It should share key insights and learning from the project, offering flexible guidance and inspiration for developing inclusive, user-led content and engagement approaches.
3. **Access project map:** A map of past and existing projects which have similar aims to *Paths to Inclusion*, to aid learning and avoid future duplication. This map should be editable, so that future projects can be added to create a developing resource.

These should be accessible, engaging and suitable for sharing with external stakeholders.

Scope of Research

The focus of the research is on accessible, inclusive and inspiring information and content - that is, how NTUK and our partners can co-design and present information and stories in ways that are relevant, engaging and welcoming to our target audiences.

While other enabling factors (e.g. guided walks, equipment, transport) may emerge during conversations, these are not the primary focus of this phase of work.

This research should build on, rather than replicate, existing insight into access barriers - focusing on specific gaps and practical implications for content creation and dissemination.

Requirements

We will appoint the research partner based on the following criteria:

1. **Relevant experience and expertise:** Demonstrated experience of designing and delivering high-quality research projects with a strong

emphasis on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). We are particularly interested in partners who have undertaken research projects with underrepresented communities and/or in the heritage or outdoor sectors.

- 2. Approach and methodology:** A clear, thoughtful and robust proposal for how you will deliver the research - including research methods, how you will ensure the work is inclusive (including any reasonable adjustments you will make for people of varying needs) and co-designed, and how you will work collaboratively with NTUK and our delivery partners.
- 3. Quality of outputs:** Evidence that you can work with delivery partners to produce accessible, inclusive, engaging and practical outputs for a range of audiences - including strategic recommendations and practical guidance for others to adopt.

Content and Style

Work should be inclusive, accessible, and aligned with NTUK's evolving communications strategy, ensuring clarity and engagement across diverse audiences.

Timeline

- Submission deadline: 30th July
- Interviews (if required): Week commencing 3rd August
- Appointment: Week commencing 10th August
- Project start: Mid-August

Fees and Payment

Budget: up to £60,000 + VAT

50% paid on appointment; 50% paid on completion of the final report.

Management of the ITQ and Project

This ITQ is being managed by the Fundraising and Development Manager with support from the Treasurer and Trustee.

The project will be managed by the Project Manager, with support from the Fundraising and Development Manager, Senior Communications Officer, and NTUK Board.

Selection Process and Method

Proposals will be assessed on understanding of the brief, clear methodology to achieve the project aims, inclusivity, experience, and ability to deliver within timelines.

Please outline who from your team will complete this work and what their relevant experience is and how the work will be spread across the team.

Please provide a simple budget breakdown showing how spend is broken down between individual team members and costs

Please give a brief indication of similar projects you have worked on before, with particular interest in participation, not-for-profit projects, and projects with heritage, landscape or environmental organisations.

We anticipate receiving a document outlining your response to this invitation, sent to rob@nationaltrails.uk.