

18 January 2017

Cllr Margaret Davidson
Leader of the Council
The Highland Council
Glenurquhart Road
Inverness IV3 5NX

Dear Cllr Davidson

Proposed threat to ranger service

We are writing in response to reports that The Highland Council is proposing to cut its ranger service following a review of the council's budget for the coming year. We share the concerns expressed by the Scottish Countryside Rangers' Association and other recreation organisations about the significant negative impacts for Highland residents and visitors that we believe would follow from the loss of this service.

Rangers make a substantial contribution to helping the local authority meet its statutory and other obligations, including those relating to promoting responsible access, protecting the environment and providing opportunities for outdoor education. The ranger service contributes to many of the priorities outlined in the council's current Single Outcome Agreement, including the following key partnership and environmental outcomes:

- To increase the number of people in areas of deprivation engaged in activities that strengthen the skills and confidence of those communities to take effective action on community issues
- To reduce health inequalities between targeted areas and the four least deprived areas in Highland.
- Manage sustainably the outstanding natural heritage of the Highlands to optimise the economic, health and learning benefits.
- Improving access to the outdoors.

We believe the ranger service offers a strong return on investment by adding value through inspiring and managing volunteer effort across the region. This supports communities and also ensures a high quality experience for tourists during their visits. The contribution to tourism is particularly important in the Highland Council area, given that VisitScotland has recently published figures showing that 14% of jobs in the region are within the tourist industry.

Rangers play a hugely important role in engaging people in the natural environment and helping them to appreciate its value, and also in encouraging more people to enjoy outdoor recreation.

Convener: Alison Mitchell
Vice-Convener: Andy Malby
Director: Brendan Paddy

The Ramblers' Association is a registered charity
England & Wales no 1093577, Scotland no
SC039799 and a company limited by guarantee,
registered in England & Wales (no 4458492).
Registered office: 2nd floor, Camelford House,
87-90 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7TW

The latter is particularly important when it is recognised that physical inactivity contributes to more than 2,500 premature deaths in Scotland each year and costs the NHS in Scotland around £94.1 million annually. There are massive benefits to our mental health and wellbeing from being more active, especially if this activity takes place in the natural environment.

Low levels of physical activity are often associated with low levels of household income, and Scottish government statistics demonstrate that adherence to the physical activity guidelines for adults declines steadily as deprivation increases. The ranger service is particularly important in engaging and supporting a wide range of people, particularly those who are less likely to enjoy the outdoors through lack of confidence or experience in taking part in these activities.

Outdoor recreation also plays a significant role in supporting the Scottish economy, especially in rural areas, with Scottish Natural Heritage estimating expenditure of £2.6 billion in 2012 arising from visits to the outdoors in Scotland. Scottish coastal environments are also a significant draw for recreation. The Scottish Marine Recreation and Tourism Survey estimated that around £2.4 billion expenditure is associated with general marine recreation and tourism including coastal walks. VisitScotland has estimated that 55% of all visitors undertook a short walk or stroll in 2015, while 39% enjoyed a longer walk or stroll and 43% came for a centre-based walking holiday. All of these tourist activities are supported by the work of the ranger services across the Highlands.

We hope The Highland Council will recognise the important role played by both the ranger service and its access officers in facilitating outdoor recreation as part of the preventative spend agenda and reconsider its proposal to withdraw support from the ranger service. This will enable more people to continue to explore the natural environment of the Highlands and reap all the benefits for their health and wellbeing as well as supporting the local economy.

We would be happy to discuss this matter further at your convenience.

Yours sincerely

Brendan Paddy
Director (Interim)

Cc:

Cllr Isobel McCallum, Convener

Cllr Audrey Sinclair, Chair of Planning, Development and Infrastructure Committee

Cllr Maxine Smith, Leader of the Opposition

Mr Steve Barron, Chief Executive

Mr Stuart Black, Director of Development and Infrastructure

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