



Walking Trails Criteria for Ireland



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Introduction

An objective of Sport Ireland is to encourage and foster participation by adults and children in sport and physical activity. The availability of high quality recreational trails is a means of facilitating this. For this reason Sport Ireland, through its Sport Ireland Outdoors unit, supports the development and promotion of recreational trails in Ireland.

Many visitors who come to Ireland are interested in walking and in using our trails. In this context it is important that our trails meet best-in-class criteria and provide an enjoyable experience for both our domestic population and visitors alike.

The document *Management Standards for Recreational Trails* was developed in consultation with trail stakeholders and published in 2008. That document provided the benchmark for the development of trails in Ireland since that time and was the criteria for the trail registration system which allowed trails to be added to the *National Trails Register* and national trails insurance scheme managed by Sport Ireland. This document is an update and refresh of the original document.

Sport Ireland, in consultation with stakeholders in the trail community, have developed this updated version of the criteria now called '**Walking Trails - Criteria for Ireland**'.

It is intended that this document will provide the criteria for all walking trail developments in Ireland.

Trails should, in so far as it is possible, be accessible to all potential users including people with a disability. When planning and developing a trail the document [The Great Outdoors – A Guide to Accessibility](#) should also be consulted. This focuses on the principles of universal design for various types of outdoor facilities including trails.

Why have criteria for trails?

The availability of nationally accepted criteria for trails has a number of benefits.

- outlines best practice for the development and management of trails
- provides guidance to trail developers and a benchmark for their work.
- promotes consistency in the quality of trails across the country
- provides a basis for a trail registration system and the listing of trails on the National Trails Register.

National Trails Register

Sport Ireland maintains a National Trails Register listing all trails which meet these criteria. Upon request, Sport Ireland will carry out a Trail Registration Inspection to assess a trail against the criteria. This involves a system whereby trails are scored against the criteria. If the trail achieves a minimum score it will become registered and therefore listed on the National Trails Register and on the Sport Ireland website. Once added to the register trails will be re-assessed against the criteria on a periodic basis to confirm that they continue to meet the criteria. A summary of the trail registration process and scoring system is provided in a separate document – [Trail Registration Process](#).

Why should trails be registered?

The National Trails Register is a list of trails that meet the criteria set out in this document. Registration of a trail:

- Provides confidence to trail developers that their trail meets the criteria
- Allows trail management groups access to the national trails insurance policy
- Gives assurance to the public that a trail is of an acceptable quality
- Allows the trail to be listed on the Sport Ireland trails website
- Allows the trail to be listed on Ordnance Survey maps
- Provides a marketing opportunity for the trail management group
- Provides an opportunity for introduction of Walks Scheme on the trail through the Department of Rural and Community Development and Local Development Companies.

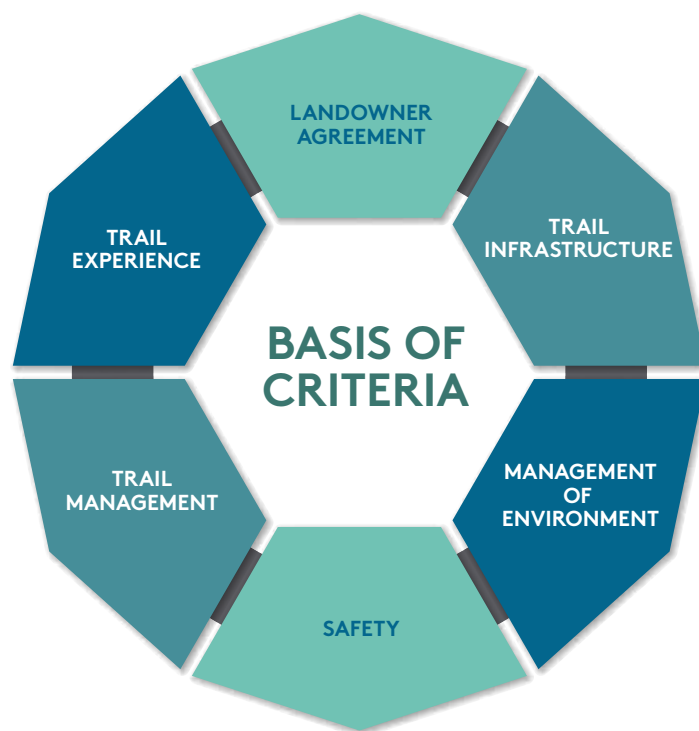
Fundamental components of a successful trail

A review of International best practice has identified that the overarching focus when developing and managing a successful recreational trail is the user experience. A successful trail provides walkers with an enjoyable and safe experience.

The success of a trail and the user experience is affected directly and indirectly by a number of fundamental and interrelated components. Each component must be considered and addressed in a sustainable way.

These components will form the basis of the criteria for the assessment and registration of trails.

Fundamental components of a successful trail



Each of the fundamental components must be considered when developing and managing a successful trail.

- **Landowner agreement:** has access to all land over which the trail passes been agreed with landowners?
- **Trail Experience:** are the trail users expectations being met?
- **Trail Infrastructure:** does trail infrastructure follow best practice?
- **Trail Management:** are there management structures, plans and processes in place to ensure the trail can continue to meet the required standard?
- **Safety:** have potential safety issues along the trail been considered and a system put in place to monitor and manage risk of injury to walkers on an ongoing basis?
- **Management of Environment:** has the impact on the environment (including land designation) been considered when developing a trail and are measures in place to protect the environment?

Details of the criteria under each of the above headings are outlined below. While listed under specific headings there are overlapping criteria and the same guidelines may appear under more than one heading.



1.0

Landowner Agreement

For a sustainable recreational trail to be developed consultation and agreement with landowners impacted is critical.

When developing a trail it will pass over either public or private land. The owners of any land over which a trail passes should be consulted at the earliest possible stage about the idea of developing a trail. Before a trail development can proceed landowner agreement must be in place.

1.1 Landowner Permission

Access to the entire trail must have the permission of the owner/occupier of the land over which the trail route passes.¹ This may include individual private landowners, companies or state agencies. Likewise there must be permitted access to and from the trail at the start and finish and at any other defined access points. It is best practice that a written agreement is made with the landowner.²

1.2 Access Without Obstruction

Unobstructed access to and from the trail and along the trail must be agreed with landowners. The entire trail must be passable e.g. at no point should a permanent manmade or natural barrier obstruct a trail without providing a means of continuing along the trail e.g. openable gate, stile, bridge, etc. as appropriate. Arrangements for overcoming an obstruction should be agreed with the landowner.

1.3 Temporary Closure

An exception to the requirements is when the trail is closed to the public for health and safety reasons related to a temporary hazard on the trail or works on the trail or adjacent lands. In such circumstances a detour or, if this is not possible, adequate warning of the closure should be provided by means of the trail information on a website and signage on the ground.

¹ Information on establishing a Permissive Access agreement with a private landowner can be found in *A Guide to Planning and Developing Recreational Trails in Ireland* available [here](#).

² A template for a basic landowner agreement can be downloaded from [here](#).

2.0

Trail Experience

The experience a walker has on a trail can be impacted by all of the components fundamental to a trail. This section focuses specifically on some key factors which can have a significant impact on the walker's experience.

2.1 Trail Information

When planning to visit a trail for the first time, a walker will need information about the trail. If Information is not available, incorrect, inaccurate or inadequate the walker will potentially have a poor experience.

Reliable and detailed Information about the trail which is easy to find, should be available on the internet. This may be a website developed locally but if a Trail Management Organisation do not have the resources to develop and maintain a website it can be listed on the Sport Ireland Outdoors website www.sportireland.ie/outdoors A trail map and the information about the trails should be downloadable/printable.

The information provided should include at least the following:

- a. i) An up-to-date map.
 - ii) Map showing a clearly defined trail route
 - iii) Map showing start and finish point
- b. Length of the trail (in km) from the start to the finish³
- c. i) Information on the trail grading (difficulty rating)
 - ii) A definition of the grade
- d. Estimated time to complete the trail for the average user
- e. Total ascent on the trail (in metres)
- f. Description/images of the waymarking used on the trail.
- g. A brief description of the trail and what the walker will experience including the surrounding environment (e.g. farmland, forest, etc.) and recognition of landowner. Also where appropriate information on any potential hazards or variable conditions on the trail e.g. cliff edge, busy road section, section impassable at high tide, section prone to flooding and impassable following heavy rain, etc.

³ If a linear trail is intended to be used as an 'out and back' route where the only option is to walk back from the end of the trail to the start point, this should be made clear in the trail information. In such cases the distance displayed should reflect the out and back distance. e.g. for a trail 3km long the total distance 'out and back' should be displayed as 6km.

- h. Information on whether dogs are permitted on the trail and if allowed clarify if dogs must be kept on a lead at all times
- i. Contact details (email and/or phone number) for a person involved in the the management of the trail for users to provide feedback/report issues or incidents on the trail
- j. Contact number for the emergency services (999 or 112)
- k. The “Leave No Trace” principles⁴ or other guidance on appropriate behaviour in the countryside
- l. Notification of any significant temporary diversions or trail closure - e.g. due to works on the trail, trail damage, flooding, etc.
- m. Details of any services available to trail users (see 2.5 below)
- n. A link showing the trail start point (trailhead) on an interactive internet map which can provide directions (e.g. Google Maps) to allow potential users to find the trail

2.2 Information board

When a walker gets to a trail the presence of an up-to-date Trail Information Board at the trailhead provides reassurance and complements the online information. On longer trails, it is recommended that information boards are also in place at popular access points along the trail.

The information provided should include at least the following:

- a.
 - i) An up-to-date map
 - ii) Map showing a clearly defined trail route
 - iii) Map showing start and finish point
 - iv) Map showing ‘you are here’ pointer
- b. Length of the trail (in km) from the start to finish
- c.
 - i) Information on the trail grading (difficulty rating)
 - ii) A definition of the grade
- d. Estimated time to complete the trail for the average user
- e. Total ascent on the trail (in metres) (not essential on obviously flat terrain)
- f. Description/Images of the waymarking used on the trail
- g. A brief description of the trail and what the walker will experience including the surrounding environment (e.g. farmland, forest, etc.) and recognition of landowner. Also where appropriate information on any potential hazards or variable conditions on the trail e.g. cliff edge, busy road section, section impassable at high tide, section prone to flooding and impassable following heavy rain, etc.

⁴ For further information on Leave No Trace <http://www.leavenotraceireland.org>



- h. Information on whether dogs are permitted on the trail and if allowed clarify if dogs must be kept on a lead at all times
- i. Contact details (email and/or phone number) for a person involved in the the management of the trail for users to provide feedback/report issues or incidents on the trail.
- j. Contact number for the emergency services (999 or 112).
- k. The “Leave No Trace” principles or other guidance on appropriate behaviour in the countryside.
- l. Notification of any significant temporary diversions or trail closure - e.g. due to works on the trail, trail damage, flooding, etc.
- m. Details of services available if any (see 2.5 below).

2.3 Interpretive Signage and Information Signage

Interpretative signage typically includes information about natural, built and cultural heritage along the trail. Such information contributes to providing the walker with an enhanced experience.

Signage may also include information and directions to attractions or services close to the trail. Signage should avoid being obtrusive and excessive and the contents should be understandable by a 12 year old. Interpretive signage is typically at a lower height to avoid being obtrusive. Signage and directions to attractions or services should be of a similar design throughout the trail.

2.4 Signage to the trailhead

Finding the starting point of a trail (trailhead) can sometimes be difficult. Appropriate signage to the trailhead should be provided on access road/nearest town or village.

2.5 Food and Accommodation and Other Services

While not part of the basic criteria for trails or a requirement for registration, these additional criteria should be considered as a means of enhancing the user's experience, in particular on long distance trails. Typically food and drink may be available in villages and towns or existing shops close to the trail. Any service providers operating on the trail should be adopting the 'Leave No Trace' principles.

2.5.1 Food, drink availability

There should be food and drink available along the trail, ideally within 3km of the trail at intervals of 20km–30km. This could be a shop, pub or cafe.

2.5.2 Rest areas

Rest areas suitable for having a picnic, including table and seating, should be considered on trails of greater than 10km.

2.5.3 Accommodation

There should be accommodation available at the start and end of the trail and along it at intervals of 20km–30km, ideally within 3km of the trail.

2.5.4 Luggage transfer

There should be luggage transfer services available for recommended daily sections of the trail.

2.5.5 Information on services

There should be information available online on all of the appropriate services which are available for trail users.

2.5.6 Public transport connections

Information on public transport which provides access to the trail should be provided in the trail information. Where buses or trains do not stop close to the trailhead, information and taxi services available should be provided.





3.0

Trail Infrastructure

A developed trail is made up of various elements of physical infrastructure. Guidelines on the basic criteria for trail infrastructure are provided in this section.

3.1 Trail Route

Access to the entire trail must have the permission of the owner/occupier of the land over which the trail route passes. This may include individual private landowners, companies or state agencies. Likewise there must be permitted access to and from the trail at the start and finish and at any other defined access points. It is best practice that a written agreement is made with the landowner.

3.1.1 Roads

Because walking on trafficked roads will not always provide a safe and enjoyable experience many walkers seek out the unique experience provided by off-road trails. Generally the focus in developing trails should be to avoid roads entirely where possible. However, it is acceptable that lightly trafficked minor local roads may be suitable for sections of a trail and this is recognised below. The following guidelines apply to roads:

1. A target to have at least 80% of the total route off-road should be applied.
2. If roads are used they should be only lightly trafficked local roads. National, Regional or other busy roads are usually unsuitable for walking, generally do not provide a good experience and should be avoided.
3. Sections on busy roads are more acceptable where there is an adjacent footpath or wide grass verge suitable for walking.
4. Developing long sections on road should be avoided. A target of no more than 3km on road at a time in one section should be applied.
5. Where a trail crosses a road it should cross directly if possible but if this is not possible it should not run on the road for more than 250m.
6. Where a route joins, crosses or runs along a busy road appropriate signage should be used as outlined in Section 3.3 below – Signage.

Local Community Trails

When designing a trail its purpose and the target user must be considered.

It is recognised that local walking trails are sometimes developed and waymarked on road to facilitate walking for exercise by people in the local community. For these trails the on road nature of the route is not a detractor for the intended users. In such cases the trail can be designated as a Local Community Trail and the on-road nature of the route should be made clear in the trail information.

Also, where a trail is developed in an urban area it may be that most or all of the route is not off-road.

However, it is still recommended that only quite lightly trafficked roads are used and where a route is in an urban area it should make use of existing footpaths.

3.1.2 Obstacles or barriers on the trail route

All sections of the route must be unobstructed and passable e.g. at no point should a permanent manmade or natural barrier obstruct a trail without providing a stile, gate or bridge, etc., as appropriate, to allow the obstruction to be passed. (Ref. also 1.2)

3.1.3 Livestock

Many developed trails go through active farmlands containing livestock. This is generally not an issue. However, not all walkers may be familiar with livestock. It is recommended that where trails are going through land where livestock is present, information about the trails should include instructions on how walkers should conduct themselves when on land with livestock present. (An example of suitable instructions is provided in Appendix A).

A critical factor in avoiding incidents with livestock on trails is to avoid bringing dogs. Where a trail crosses land used for keeping livestock, instructions saying 'DO NOT BRING DOGS' must be clearly communicated in information about the trail and on signage at the start of the trail.

It is best practice to include signage on the trail that indicates when users are entering land where livestock is present. An example of a suitable sign is provided in Fig. 1



Figure 1: Bull warning sign



Figure 2: General livestock warning signage

If there is potentially dangerous livestock on a route a notice to this effect should be put in place. (See example in Figure 2). If possible an animal with a known history of dangerous behaviour should not be put on land where there is a trail. If this is essential a diversion should be considered where practical. An alternative to a diversion may be the use of electric fencing segregating animals from walkers, if this is considered by the landowner and trail manager to be adequate.

In the case of a trail passing through land with livestock present it is good practice for the trail management organisation and landowner to work in cooperation to help ensure that the safety of walkers on the trail is considered at all times.

3.1.4 Electric Fencing on the route

Where an electric fence is on or adjacent to the route in a location where it might be touched by a walker, a warning sign should be used. For longer sections repeat usage of the sign as appropriate (Ref also section 3.3.1)

If it is necessary to cross or open such a fence at any point, a means of passing safely should be provided e.g. protective tubing attached to the fence to prevent users coming in contact with it or a system which allows walkers to open the fence to pass through and then put it back in place.

3.1.5 Other fencing on the route

Where guy wires are used to support a fence post and have the potential to be a trip hazard a trail should, where possible, go around the wire or clear signage should be used to highlight the presence of the wire to walkers with tape/ribbon/paint as appropriate.

3.1.6 Parking

Suitable off-road car parking space should be available at the start of the trail route/trailhead. The amount of car parking space available should be appropriate for the typical level of trail usage. Ideally bike racks suitable for securely locking bicycles should also be provided.

Where a trail is suitable for use by people with a disability, parking spaces should be identified accordingly.

3.2 Waymarking

The intention of providing waymarking on a trail is to ensure that trail users can follow the trail route without necessarily referring to a paper map, online map or app, etc. Waymarking should be provided with the assumption that it is the walker's only means of navigation along the trail.

3.2.2 Waymarking on the trail

- a. Where there are junctions on a trail route or any other situation where it is not totally clear which way the trail route goes, waymarking should be:
 - i) in place and correctly aligned (pointing the right way).
 - ii) securely erected, in good condition (not loose, broken, damaged) clean and clearly legible (e.g. not faded).
 - iii) located so that that it is clearly visible to a walker approaching from either direction of travel. Waymarking should not be put on the side of a marker post as this will only be visible when passing the marker and not visible in advance when approaching the marker.
 - iv) not obscured by vegetation or any other obstruction.

Note: Information Board, maps of the route and other sources of information about a trail should state if it is waymarked for one way use only or for two-way use.

- b. The same design/colour of marker and marking standard should be used consistently throughout an entire trail route.
- c. If there are multiple trails in the same area, markers should be coloured, named or numbered differently for each trail such that each route can be clearly followed.

Note: Trails known as *National Waymarked Trails (long distance trails)* should use the yellow "walking man" symbol and arrow. The use of this symbol is reserved for *National Waymarked Trails* and must not be used on other trails. However, the "walking man" symbol may be used in a different colour on other trails.

- d. On sections of trail greater than 1km in length where there are no junctions, reassurance markers should be provided approximately every 500m and at least every 1km.
- e. On trails of up to 10km at least one waymarker showing the distance to the trail end could be provided. This should be located at the halfway point on the trail. For trails greater than 10km markers including the distance to the trail end and/or other destinations should be incorporated at least every 10km.
- f. Any temporary diversions on the trail should be clearly waymarked.

Note: details of significant diversions should be communicated in online information about the trail and on the trail Information Board.

3.3 Signage

Signage should be used to inform walkers about various things along a trail or related to a trail including the following:

- To warn walkers of hazards or potential hazards ahead on or close to the trail
- To inform walkers of a temporary or permanent diversion from the original route
- To provide useful information to walkers

3.3.1 Warning signage

The use of warning signage should be considered where there is a potential risk to walkers. However, the use of unnecessary and excessive signage should be avoided. Excessive use of signage will make it less effective and may result in 'signage pollution' in what is usually a natural environment. Warning signage is likely to be most effective when it is also informative. e.g. a sign saying 'Trail closed due to timber felling operations ahead' is preferred to a sign which just says 'Trail Closed' and provides no explanation. Typically warning signage will be used to warn and protect walkers in the following circumstances:

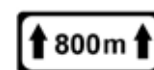
- Where a trail joins or crosses a National or Regional road or other busy road, signage should be in place to warn motorists to expect walkers on the road as per the Traffic Signs Manual - Section 6.17.3 and 6.17.4 included below.

6.17.3 Where pedestrians frequently use a road without a proper footway, Sign W 140 may be provided to warn drivers of their presence. Where the length over which pedestrians are likely to be on the road is longer than about 250m, a Supplementary Plate P 002 should be used to indicate the length.

6.17.4 The sign may also be provided where vulnerable road users are likely to cross a road in appreciable numbers.



W 140: Pedestrians



P 002: Length

- If a route runs from an off-road section onto or across a National, Regional or other busy road, where it is not obvious to the walker in advance, it is recommended that a sign to warn walkers is erected on the trail in advance of the point where the route joins the road
- Where the trail route is approaching a location where the route runs adjacent to or close to exposed cliff edges or other steep drops
- Where the trail route is approaching a location where there are open mine shafts which are beside or close to the route
- Where there is work happening on or along the trail but it is still considered passable with care.
- Where there is a section of trail along a beach which may be impassable during high tide
- Where there is an electric fence along the edge of a trail with which walkers could easily come in contact.

3.3.2 Detour Signage

A diversion or detour from the original planned route of the trail may be required for various reasons as follows:

- Significant work happening on or along the trail where it is considered that the risk to walkers is higher than acceptable and the trail needs to be temporarily closed e.g. major trail upgrade work involving machinery, timber felling, farm vehicles crossing regularly.
- A section of the trail going through land where walkers may come in contact with known dangerous livestock e.g. a bull
- Because the trail is impassable due to storm/weather damage e.g. a bridge is out, landslide, trees down, etc.

If there is a diversion or a closure of a trail walkers must be informed both in online information about the trail and at the trailhead. In both cases clear and visible information with details of the closure or diversion should be provided.

3.4 Trail Furniture and Structures

Trail furniture and structures will be required as appropriate along a trail and may include:

- Information Boards
- Seating
- Markers
- Signage
- Stiles
- Gates
- Bridges
- Bog bridges
- Boardwalks
- Steps

3.4.1 Quality of Trail Furniture and Structures

Trail furniture and structures must be designed, constructed, installed and maintained such that they are fit for purpose, robust, reliable and secure. They should not be rotting, damaged, loose or unstable. There should be no sharp edges or protrusions which a walker is likely to come in contact with.

If a structure becomes unsafe and is in a condition such that a walker is likely to be injured the issue must be addressed as soon as possible. If appropriate consideration should be given to putting a warning sign on the structure pending its repair/replacement and/or diverting walkers around the structure.

3.4.2 Access Management at boundaries

When putting trail furniture/structures in place to manage access across land boundaries (agricultural or otherwise) the principle should be to select the least restrictive option for potential users, (including wheelchair users and families with children in buggies, etc.) should be adopted while also meeting the needs of landowners.

No single structure provides access across boundaries that is satisfactory in all situations so the recommended hierarchy to enable the optimum choices to be made, is listed below.

Where possible and with the agreement of the landowner the type of structure chosen should be in accordance with the following list (displayed in least restrictive option order):

- a) gap;
- b) gate;
- c) kissing gate;
- d) stile.

3.4.3 Barbed wire fencing

Where barbed wire is connected to stiles, gates or other similar situations where walkers might place their hands on a barb or otherwise get snagged on a barb, the barbs must be removed or covered to ensure they do not cause an injury.

3.4.4 Slip Resistant Surface

If the walking surface does not provide adequate grip in all weather conditions, a supplementary slip resistant surface should be applied. This may be the case on stiles, board walks, bridges or steps. Options include slip resistant paint, staples and wire mesh.

Reference documents with specifications for the various items of trail furniture and structures can be found in **Appendix B – Useful References**

3.5 Trail Surface

The surface of a trail can have a major impact on the enjoyment of walkers. A trail routed inappropriately, (e.g. across bogland or other soft ground) can also cause significant environmental damage and have an impact on the trail's long-term sustainability.

All sections of a trail should have a surface that is durable, robust and fit for purpose, for the level of use. The surface should remain in this condition.⁵

The surface should have suitable drainage such that it is not waterlogged. Under normal circumstances it should not have extended sections which are boggy or have deep mud such that it is difficult or uncomfortable to walk through.

⁵ While a trail in a remote area used by a small number of walkers might have a surface which is adequate, the same surface might not be adequate on a trail with higher usage in a more accessible area.

The surface should not have hidden holes likely to cause an injury or unseen trip hazards. If there are extremely steep sections of trail, depending on the trail surface material and the grade of the trail, it may be appropriate to build steps to make the surface more suitable for walking.

Note: The type of surface on a trail should always be suitable for the intended users and the difficulty rating assigned. While an uneven surface with some obstacles or steep sections may be acceptable on a difficult trail it would not be acceptable on a trail graded easy. Along with the width, gradient and other features the trail surface can be classified. Based on the classification of all sections of the trail the grading or difficulty rating can be established. Further details on this topic are provided in a separate document [Classification and Grading of Walking Trails](#).

The environmental impact of the trail should also be managed on an ongoing basis. The trail surface should be a single line and if there is evidence of trail spread or trail braiding, measures to address this should be considered. (Ref also 6.3)

3.6 Vegetation

Vegetation growth on a trail can result in conditions which vary from being inconvenient for walkers to making the trail impassable and can therefore have an impact on the enjoyment and experience of walkers.

3.6.1 Protruding vegetation

The sides and above the trail route should be free from protruding vegetation that could come in contact with a walker.

3.6.2 Underfoot

The surface of the trail should be free from long grass and other vegetation which makes it difficult to walk.

3.6.3 Waymarking signage and trail furniture

Vegetation growth should be cut back so that it does not obscure waymarking or signage or impact the use of any trail furniture or structures.

To prevent issues related to vegetation overgrowth a vegetation maintenance programme for a trail is essential. During the spring/summer months when growth is at its maximum the frequency of maintenance may need to be increased.

Note: hedge cutting is prohibited between 1 March and 31st August. This applies to hedges and semi-natural vegetation.

3.6.4 Invasive Species of vegetation

Where invasive species of plants are growing along the trail a plan for the management of these plants should be in place. Incorrect management of the plant (including cutting) can cause it to spread.

Note: Guidance is provided on the Invasive Species Ireland website <http://invasivespeciesireland.com/invasive-plant-management/>



4.0

Trail Management

For a trail to provide walkers with an enjoyable and safe experience and remain in good condition it must be managed on an ongoing basis. A key element of trail management is that the trail is monitored for any issues that might arise and that it is maintained appropriately. This will require some form of management organisation.

4.1 Trail Management Organisation

A trail management organisation is a group of people who manage the trail. The number of people involved and the roles they play will vary depending on the size and complexity of the trail. For a long trail such as a long-distance route, there may be a larger number of people involved with defined roles, such as a committee with a chairperson, treasurer, secretary, trail inspection/maintenance co-ordinator, trail promotion co-ordinator, etc.

For a smaller organisation there may be one or two key members who can call on other resources as required. There is no fixed requirement for how a trail management organisation works provided it works for those involved and ensures the trail is adequately managed.

It is recommended that if possible there is one point of contact in the organisation for correspondence.

The work of a trail management organisation could include the following:

- Initial planning and development of the trail such that it complies with the guidelines in this document
- Getting the trail registered and listed on the National Trails Register and national trails insurance scheme if appropriate
- Implementing measures to reduce the risk of injury to users e.g. use of signage to caution walkers, the erection of a safety handrail on steep steps, etc.
- Working with landowners on the trail to ensure their needs and the needs of walkers are addressed e.g. management of signage on gates, electric fences, etc.
- Ongoing management of the trail including:
 - regular local trail monitoring inspections
 - maintenance and upkeep of the trail
 - repair and/or upgrade of the trail if required
 - keeping inspection, maintenance, and repair records
- Securing/managing funding for the ongoing maintenance and upkeep of the trail
- Promoting the trail via brochure and/or a website
- Promoting/organising events to activate the trail

4.2 Trail Management Plan

It is best practice to document how the trail will be managed. This can be as detailed or as basic as required, depending on the trail and the resources available. At a minimum a Trail Management Plan should outline:

- the trail management organisation (who does what to manage the trail)
- how often the trail will be monitored/inspected and how will this be done (e.g. provide a copy of a checklist/recording sheet in the plan)
- how often the trail will be maintained (may be the same frequency as monitoring) and what work will be done
- funding arrangements/resources for managing the trail

Other items in the plan might include:

- How the trail will be promoted
- Events to be run on the trail
- Trail upgrade/improvement plans
- Trail promotion plans

4.3 Records

Documented records related to the management of a trail must be maintained. This should include records of:

- details of inspections carried out including findings
- details of maintenance or repair work carried out on a trail
- details of any issues reported by the public
- any specific decisions made by the Trails Management Organisation
- details of any risks identified on the trail and any measures to reduce the risk
- all records must be dated.

The retention of all records related to the trail is best practice and will potentially be critical as a form of defence in the event of a claim for an injury on a trail.

For a trail to be listed on the National Trails Register it is mandatory that there is an organisation / committee managing the trail. A key component of trail management is routine inspection and maintenance of the trail at an appropriate frequency and that records of this work are retained.

It is a condition of the national trails insurance scheme that for cover to be eligible a trail has in place: “a system for ongoing maintenance and monitoring of the trail managed locally by the Trail Management Organisation. Any safety issues found or reported must be prioritised and addressed accordingly. Documented records of all monitoring or work carried out on the trail must be retained by the management organisation.”

Guidance and templates for trail inspection and maintenance plans and related record keeping are downloadable from the Sport Ireland Outdoors website [here](#).

5.0

Safety

The safety of walkers on a trail is of paramount importance.

When addressing safety the term 'potential safety issue' is used when referring to a hazard which is likely to cause serious injury. There are generally two types of 'potential safety issue':

- An issue that is a feature of the trail route e.g. a cliff top trail, a trail on a tidal beach. In these cases walkers must be informed in advance in online information about the trail and by appropriate signage on the trail.
- An issue that is a defect or problem with the trail infrastructure e.g. a broken stile, slippery footbridge. In these cases action must be taken to address the defect or problem.

Potential safety issues which are a feature of the trail may be expected on trails intended for experienced walkers but should be avoided on trails for casual or inexperienced walkers.

Regardless of the ability and experience level of intended walkers on a trail, the golden rule is:

A trail should never have unexpected hazards that have the potential to cause injury.

A trail cannot be registered until action has been taken to address any Potential Safety Issues which exist.

There is always some level of risk when carrying out activities in the outdoors and it is not expected nor is it possible to entirely eliminate all risks. However, the trail management organisation must ensure that appropriate steps are taken to mitigate risk and address potential safety issues appropriately depending on the grade of the trail. Where a trail is graded as easy and suitable for inexperienced or occasional walkers what might be considered as a safety hazard is different than on a trail graded difficult and only suitable for experienced walkers. However, in either situation there should be no surprises that might catch walkers out.

5.1 Potential Safety Issues inherent in the route

Any potential safety issues which are a feature of a route must be identified when the trail is being developed. If the risk is considered to be unacceptable for the intended user of the trail it may be necessary to look for an alternative route.

If there is a Potential Safety Issue on a route there must be appropriate signage in place. Where a potential safety issue has the potential to pose a significant risk to walkers e.g. a cliff top, exceptionally steep terrain, etc., this must be highlighted in information about the trail so that walkers are informed in advance of deciding to walk the trail.

Note: the use of a busy road for a section of trail or a busy road crossing, while a different type of issue than a cliff, may also need warning signage if unexpected or particularly hazardous.

5.2 Temporary Potential Safety Issues on the route

Some issues along a trail route may be temporary (e.g. timber felling, work on the trail). It is critical for the trail management organisation to be aware of and manage such situations in conjunction with landowners. If the risk of injury to walkers is considered to be high it is recommended that a diversion is put in place to bypass the potential issue. If this is not possible it may be necessary to temporarily close the trail.

Note: if the trail is closed or there is a significant diversion in place this must be indicated in the information about the trail so that potential users are informed in advance.

5.3 Potential Safety Issues – infrastructure

Most other potential safety issues are likely to be related to trail infrastructure. When assessing an issue the likelihood of the issue resulting in injury and the seriousness of the injury should be considered.

When a Potential Safety Issue is identified it should be addressed immediately or as soon as possible.

If an issue cannot be rectified immediately other options are:

- Putting temporary signage in place to warn walkers (if the issue can be bypassed with care and thus injury avoided) until such time as it is rectified
- If the issue is significant either a diversion should be put in place or the route should be closed e.g. significant damage to a bridge which is in danger of collapse.

A list of common Potential Safety Issues is provided in **Appendix C**.

5.4 Regular Inspections

Trail infrastructure can change over time due to weather, wear and tear and other reasons and a hazard which was not present when a trail was originally developed may arise or an existing hazard may become more significant over time and require action.

To ensure the ongoing safety of a trail, regular inspections must be part of the Trail Management Plan. This is a key element of risk management.

5.5 Records

Records of all decisions, inspections or work carried out that are related to safety or may impact safety on the trail must be recorded. (See also Section 1.3). Specifically related to safety this includes:

- Assessment of the trail for inherent potential safety issues, findings, decisions made and actions taken/ work carried out
- Regular trail inspections including any potential safety issues identified
- Records of decisions on what action would be taken to address any safety issues identified during inspection or otherwise (e.g. by the public)
- Any reported safety-related incidents on the trail and any decisions made related to these and actions taken
- Any work carried out on the trail

All records should include dates and be signed off by the appropriate person.

For further guidance on the topic of safety see the Visitor Safety in the Countryside website <https://vscg.org/>



6.0

Environment

When developing and managing a trail it is crucial that the environmental impacts of the trail are considered and managed on an ongoing basis.

6.1 Impact of designated sites

If a route passes through or is adjacent to a designated site of environmental, archaeological or architectural interest, documented authorization from the appropriate authority must be on record⁶.

6.2 Litter/Waste

Litter and waste dumped on a trail will detract from the users' experience and has a significant impact on the environment. The route should be kept free from litter, broken glass and fly-tipped waste.

A litter monitoring and pick up plan must be included in the trail inspection and maintenance plan. The schedule for this may need to be more frequent if there is a littering problem or at times of high usage.

6.3 Trail creep

The environmental impact of the trail should be managed on an ongoing basis to prevent the trail becoming wider or becoming braided. Measures to prevent this should be taken as appropriate. (Ref also 3.5)

6.4 Public awareness

The "Leave No Trace" principles⁷ or other guidance on appropriate behaviour in the countryside should be communicated to potential walkers on the trail in the online information about the trail and on the trail Information Board.

⁶ Details of how to address designated sites at the trail planning stage can be found in Sec 1.7 in [A Guide to Planning and Developing Recreational Trails in Ireland](#).

⁷ Further information on [Leave No Trace](#)

A photograph of a forest path with a wooden fence, overlaid with a teal graphic element. The path is made of gravel and leads into a dense forest of tall, thin trees. A rustic wooden fence made of logs and posts runs along the right side of the path. Sunlight filters through the trees, creating dappled shadows on the path. A large, semi-transparent teal shape is overlaid on the top right of the image, containing the word 'Appendices' in white text.

Appendices

Appendix A: Livestock – Information for Trail Users

Recommended text for information to the public on how to conduct themselves when on a trail with livestock present

1. Do not bring dogs onto trails where livestock is present. The trail information will indicate if dogs are allowed on a trail. If they are not allowed this usually indicates that there is livestock on the trail.
2. When walking through a field with animals always keep them in view. Don't turn your back on them.
3. Do not allow small children to run around while passing by livestock. Keep them by your side. Cattle can react to small children running around in the same way as dogs.
4. Carry a walking stick through fields with animals.
5. Be prepared for cattle to react, and, where possible, walk carefully and quietly around them - do not split up a clustered group and do not run.
6. Should a bull or cow approach you, turn round to face it. If necessary take a couple of steps towards it, waving your arms and shouting firmly.
7. Above all, do not put yourself at risk. If you feel threatened, if possible find another way round that is safe, returning to the original path as soon as is possible.
8. Remember to leave gates as you find them (open or closed) when walking through fields containing livestock.
9. If you are attacked or suffer a frightening incident, report this to the landowner, trail management group/agency and Sport Ireland.

The above information could be promoted on trail information boards at trailhead locations in promotional leaflets and on websites.

Appendix B: Useful References

- “Guide to Trail Design and Construction” - Mountain Meitheal (available through www.pathsavers.org)
- Principles and Standards for Trail Development in Northern Ireland - a 76 page document, explaining the principles behind building sustainable off-road trails and the standards that should be adopted. The publication is available to purchase from [Outdoor Recreation NI](#)
- [Constructed tracks in the Scottish Uplands](#) - Scottish Natural Heritage
- [Lowland Path Construction](#) – A Guide to Good Practice
- [Outdoor Access Design Guide](#) – Scottish Natural Heritage
- [Great Outdoors - A Guide for Accessibility](#) – Irish Wheelchair Association
- [Building for Everyone](#) – A Universal design Approach – National Disability Authority
- [Countryside for All](#) – Good Practice Guide – Fieldfare Trust
- [“On the right track: surface requirements for shared use routes.”](#) – The Countryside Agency
- [“Shared Use Routes for Pedestrians and Cyclists”](#) – UK Department of Transport
- [Toolkit to Success – Accessible Walks Schemes](#) – Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland

Appendix C: Typical Potential Safety Issues

Trail Surface

- Deep holes or collapsed drains in the path or track

Trail Route and Surroundings

- Exceptionally dangerous roads without signs to warn motorists of walkers
- Dangerous cliffs, mines or quarries located near the trail without warning signs
- Timber felling operations without warning signs
- Barbed wire that may injure a walker
- Loose wire or other items as trip hazard
- Dangerous river crossing or flooding
- Route passing through a field with dangerous livestock with no alternate route in place

Trail Furniture

- Damaged, rotting or loose stile
- Damaged, rotting or loose sleepers, footbridges, boardwalks, bog bridges
- Damaged, rotting or loose handrail
- Dangerously slippery stile or steps without non-slip surface
- Dangerously slippery sleepers, footbridges, boardwalks, bog bridges without non-slip surface
- Unsupported timber stile steps
- Protruding nails on stile or crossing place
- Arrow plates with sharp edges protruding that may injure a walker



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