

## **EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL**

**COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE – 9<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2005**

### **EAST AYRSHIRE OUTDOOR ACCESS PROJECT – PROGRESS REPORT**

#### **Report by Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services**

#### **1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 To update the Community Services Committee on the progress of the implementation of the East Ayrshire Outdoor Access Strategy and to advise of potential future developments.

#### **2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 The East Ayrshire Outdoor Access Strategy (Approved by Community Services Committee on 29 May 2002) aims to develop :-

" A series of well planned, co-ordinated and used path networks which will provide connections between communities, meet the social and health needs of communities, realise the area's tourism potential, promote more sustainable transport choices and support economic and environmental regeneration."

- 2.2 In 2003, East Ayrshire Council was awarded over £2.5 million to develop a path network in the Coalfield area of East Ayrshire. This Outdoor Access Project will contribute to a number of policy agendas including competitive locations, environmental improvements, economic benefits through a healthy working population, environmental education, interpretation of heritage, improved perception of EA Coalfield area and regeneration of derelict land championed by opencast operators, RSPB and SNH.
- 2.3 In February 2005 the Land Reform Scotland Act (2003) was enacted, placing several powers and duties on East Ayrshire Council to enable the Council to maintain responsible use of the countryside. These include the duty to produce a Core Path Plan that will meet the needs of the community, to establish an Outdoor Access Forum and to promote the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.

#### **3. PROGRESS TOWARDS THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EAST AYRSHIRE OUTDOOR ACCESS STRATEGY**

- 3.1 The Coalfield Access Project commenced in January 2003, with the aim of implementing four key strategic routes:-
- The River Ayr Way – Scotland's first 'Source to Sea' medium distance route that begins at Glenbuck Loch and follows the River Ayr to Ayr Harbour. This 66km linear route is complimented by four local path networks in East Ayrshire, in the communities of Muirkirk, Sorn, Catrine and Mauchline.

- The Scottish Coal Cycle Route – sponsored by Scottish Coal, this route provides an off road, long distance cycle route between Dalmellington and Coalburn.
- The Doon Valley Path Network – a series of paths for all abilities and all user groups that connects the towns of the Doon Valley.
- The Lugar Water Network – a network of routes based around Auchinleck Estate and connecting the communities of Drongan and Ochiltree with the River Ayr Way.

60% of the River Ayr Way in East Ayrshire is complete with contractors having been appointed for the remaining sections up until Ballochmyle Gorge. This is a partnership project with South Ayrshire Council. East Ayrshire Council has been given delegated authority to act on South Ayrshire Council's behalf and work has begun on the design of the route from Stair to Ayr. The launch of the River Ayr Way is planned for April 2006.

The development of the River Ayr Way has also included the implementation of an innovative audio trail around the village of Muirkirk, interpretation panels in Sorn and Catrine and a wildlife viewing centre at Glenbuck Loch.

Many of the contracts for the Doon Valley Path Network have been let. East Ayrshire's first dedicated bridle route is now complete in Patna. A network of routes is also now available around Hollybush Estate.

The Lugar Path Network is near completion.

The first section of the Scottish Coal Cycle Route is now complete and the route is planned for completion in June 2006.

- 3.2 Realising the tourism potential of East Ayrshire is a fundamental principle within the East Ayrshire Outdoor Access Strategy and has been central to the development and implementation of the Coalfield Access Project. An economic appraisal of the River Ayr Way expects this flagship project to attract 80,000 visitors each year. A tourism information pack which includes route information, local interest information and accommodation and transport facilities is being produced. Features in the Scottish Executive's Walkwise Magazine and Country Walking Magazine have already led to the establishment of a very extensive mailing list.

In order to sustain the level of visitor numbers that is expected on this route and to promote an increase in spend, much work has gone into providing advice and assisting in grant applications for existing tourism businesses and to establishing new tourism businesses. These include:-

- Development of an interpretation and information centre within the Failford Inn.
- Conversion of an abandoned shop into a tearoom and information centre in Catrine.

- Expansion of the Catrine Caravan Park to include provision for camping.
- Establishment of holiday accommodation in Muirkirk.

The East Ayrshire Outdoor Access Unit has been shortlisted for a Scottish Thistle Award through VisitScotland. This award celebrates excellence, professionalism and innovation in the tourism industry.

The Doon Valley Path Network was the subject of a study investigating the feasibility of a wildlife or environmental tourism product for the whole area. This has led to the development of a tourism information pack for the area that includes leaflets about the numerous routes, cafes and restaurants, things to do in the area and local interest. This pack will be available by the end of November 2005.

- 3.3 Another important theme of the Outdoor Access Strategy which is being implemented through the Coalfield Access Project in partnership with the Community Activity to Community Health (CATCH) project is the development of healthy and sustainable communities. 10 walking groups have been established with over 200 regular walkers. 28 volunteers from the community have been trained to lead these groups to ensure that they can be sustained beyond the life time of the Coalfield Access Project.

17 trainee placements have been offered as part of a job rotation and skills training programme set up with local contractors and landowners. The trainees taking part in the project are long term unemployed, have learning difficulties or face other barriers to social inclusion.

The East Ayrshire Outdoor Access Unit has been selected as a case study for the Scottish Executive's research on 'Health and Transport Choices' and is held as an example of best practice by Paths to Health. 'Paths to Health' is a charity supported by the Scottish Executive to promote healthy lifestyle changes through walking.

- 3.4 Outwith the Coalfield Access Project, other projects have been implemented and include:-

- Extension of the National Cycle Route from Kilmarnock Town Centre to the Dean Castle Country Park. This project attracted external funds of £86,000.
- Additional routes, including disabled access to the William Wallace Statue at Loudoun Hill and a circular route around Grougar Mains, as well as the establishment of a pilot training programme to upgrade the path network in the Irvine Valley. This has attracted over £90,000 from the European Regional Development Fund Retrospective Programme.
- Publication of the Kilmarnock Town Trail to provide two walking routes around the town, looking at key historical features. This publication has been translated into Braille.

- Upgrade of an existing route in Kilmaurs and the development of signage and a leaflet for the Kilmaurs Town Trail.
- Support to Stewarton Woodland Action Trust in appointing a consultant to produce an environmental regeneration plan for the town.

#### **4. PLANNED PROJECTS FOR 2006 / 2007**

- 4.1 The development of an off road cycle route connecting the Irvine Valley Path Network, through Kilmarnock to the National Cycle Network in Irvine has passed the first round of Scottish Executive funding bids, which is being co-ordinated by Sustrans Scotland. This bid is for 100% funding and is to the value of £605,000. If successful, this route requires to be implemented by March 2007.
- 4.2 A second bid was also submitted in this round of funding and has also passed the first stage. It is also 100% funding of promotional materials for the path network and amounts to £197,000.
- 4.3 A successful funding bid has also been made to the Scottish Natural Heritage for a feasibility study for the Gree Viaduct long distance route from Kilwinning, through Lugton to Barrhead. This is a partnership project with East Renfrewshire Council and North Ayrshire Council and has attracted £20,000. This project is also the subject of a section 75 agreement, which ensures a private contribution of £50,000 to the implementation of the route.
- 4.4 In the same style as the River Ayr Way and the Doon Valley Packs, a tourism information pack is also being developed for the Irvine Valley.
- 4.5 Funding applications to the value of £150,000 have also been submitted for the Crosshouse to Knockentiber 'recycle' path, which is a demonstration path using only recycled material and the creation of an off road multi use path between Hurlford and Galston.
- 4.6 In partnership with East Renfrewshire Council and South Lanarkshire Council, East Ayrshire Council has successfully negotiated enough funds to implement the Whitelees Forest Access Strategy with Scottish Power as part of the development of Whitelees Windfarm. This will provide important strategic links to the Irvine Valley Path Network.
- 4.7 A marketing initiative to maximise the tourism benefits of the Irvine Valley and Dalmellington Walking Festivals is being developed. The project will pull together these existing walking festivals and add them to potential new festivals in Muirkirk, New Cumnock and Kilmarnock and ensure that there is a consistent approach to their promotion and that there is no overlap in the products that are offered.

#### **5. LAND REFORM SCOTLAND ACT (2003)**

- 5.1 The Core Path Plan for East Ayrshire must be produced by February 2008. The consultation stage has begun and a toolkit is being developed to allow communities and external groups to participate in this process. It is anticipated that this stage will be complete by the end of 2006.

## **6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 Nil

## **7. LEGAL AUTHORITY/ IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 Nil

## **8. POLICY/COMMUNITY PLAN IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 The project is informed by the East Ayrshire Outdoor Access Strategy, the Community Plan and local/national strategies relating to tourism and economic development, biodiversity, health promotion, health inequalities and social inclusion.

## **9. CONCLUSIONS**

9.1 This Outdoor Access Unit has made significant progress in implementing the East Ayrshire Outdoor Access Strategy, particularly by ensuring that outdoor access not only meets the traditional recreational agenda, but also has a significant role in developing the tourism potential of East Ayrshire and supporting healthy lifestyles and social inclusion.

9.2 The East Ayrshire Outdoor Access Strategy continues to attract major levels of external funds to deliver both strategic and local level projects.

9.3 The initial stage in the production of the East Ayrshire Core Path Plan has begun.

## **10. RECOMMENDATIONS**

10.1 It is recommended that the Committee note the contents of this report.

William Stafford

**Executive Director of Community Services**

WS/JAG/AF

18<sup>TH</sup> October 2005

### **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS**

1. East Ayrshire Outdoor Access Strategy

Any person wishing to inspect the background papers listed above should telephone (01563) 554748 and ask for Anneke Freel, Outdoor Access Project Manager.

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