

Draft principles for path works in Eryri (for discussion)

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Background

Snowdonia National Park Authority, along with other organisations such as the National Trust, conduct significant path works in Eryri every year, in order to respond to the challenges posed by use and weather. BMC Cymru supports good path work to help reduce the environmental impact on these sensitive environments, and wishes to engage constructively with the Park, landowners and other stakeholders. This document outlines some principles which we believe should guide path work in Eryri. If supported by the membership in north Wales, we would use these principles to guide our engagement in future path work by the SNPA or others.

Approach

The brief principles below are not intended to provide hard and fast rules that would dictate what should be done: the specific context of any piece of path should always be taken into account. Instead, the principles would offer a guide to how path work should be approached.

We also recognise that a huge amount of work has already been done by many organisations (including the BMC), and this document aims to draw upon, and refer to that work, rather than reinventing the wheel (principle #1). BMC Cymru will engage with other like-minded organisations to attempt to build a consensus set of principles, while recognising that different stakeholders may disagree over the specifics of individual cases.

The principles are intended to apply to works on paths or tracks and associated works including drainage, signs, bridges etc, whether by the Park, landowners or other stakeholders.

Proposed principles

1. Consideration of best practice design standards

Numerous best practice guides and design standards have been produced for paths in hill and mountain areas of the UK. All work in Eryri should take these into consideration. While they may not be prescriptive, deviations from them should be explicitly deliberated with stakeholders and justified. Some relevant standards include:

BMC: <https://www.thebmc.co.uk/mending-our-ways-managing-upland-paths>

NatureScot's standards for delivering path projects in Scotland's mountains:
<https://www.nature.scot/upland-path-management-standards-delivering-path-projects-scotlands-mountains>

Mountaineering Ireland's Principles to guide the management of path erosion in Ireland's upland areas <https://www.mountaineering.ie/files/Upland%20Path%20Principles%20-%20March%202013.pdf>

2. Consultation

Those proposing path work should consult with the relevant stakeholders on the objectives, overall approach, and detailed design of any path work in Snowdonia. We believe this goes beyond the scope of the existing Local Access Fora, and we would welcome the establishment of a group similar to the Mountain Liaison Group in the Lake District.

Relevant stakeholders to be consulted include:

- Representative bodies, including BMC Cymru (Access and Conservation Officer: Elfyn Jones) , Ramblers Cymru, Cycling-UK (Wales officer: Gwenda Owen), OpenMTB (Tom Hutton or Andrew Nelson), Welsh Cycling.
- Community Councils
- Statutory and non-governmental environmental bodies, e.g. NRW, Cymdeithas Eryri, RSPB as appropriate to the site.
- Relevant local and national clubs (e.g. Eryri Harriers, Clwb Beicio Mynydd Eryri, Clwb Mynydda Cymru)
- Other individuals who visit the areas in question, especially regular and local users, who might be reached through e.g. social media

Consultations should be held at an early enough stage to allow genuine input into decision-making.

3. Minimising Environmental Impact

In most cases the primary objective of path repairs in the uplands should be to reduce environmental impact (e.g. erosion). Path work must be designed to ensure that it doesn't itself lead to further impacts (e.g. erosion caused by poor drainage). Path repairs should aim to achieve a durable repair that does not exacerbate environmental impacts or require further damaging repairs.

4. Minimalism

Works should be the least intrusive technique required to fulfil the objectives and respect the other principles. In particular, path work in the uplands should generally avoid removing bedrock. Thus, while sometimes a heavier duty repair may be needed to ensure durability (e.g. replacing the entire path surface), if a more minimalist approach (e.g. installation of cross-drains) would be sustainable, that would be preferred. Where possible, earlier, more minimalist intervention should be considered if it can avoid the need for more significant intervention being required later.

5. Accessibility

Although we believe that path work in the uplands should normally be restricted to that required to reduce environmental impact, sometimes stakeholders may undertake works with other objectives, such as increasing accessibility to e.g. people with reduced mobility. In some cases, there may be conflicts or trade-offs between achieving this objective and other principles (such as minimalism, reducing visual impact or maintaining the path's character). These should be minimised where possible, but remaining trade-offs should be deliberated with stakeholders (including those representing the target groups) in an open manner. Considerations should include: demand from the target groups, suitability of the route for these objectives (given the other principles, and considering alternatives), trade-offs / conflicts with other principles, and coherence (will the proposed works actually achieve an accessible path over the intended route, given the nature of terrain). For example, does an 'access for all' designed section lead into other sections that are unlikely to be suitable?

There are several useful policies and resources in this area, which should be consulted:

- NRW guidance: <https://cdn.naturalresources.wales/media/682681/gn004-by-all-reasonable-means-least-restrictive-access-to-the-outdoors.pdf>
- BMC equity group:
- Fieldfare Trust <https://www.pathsforall.org.uk/resource/countryside-for-all>

6. Induced demand

Where path works are carried out to reduce erosion, it is widely accepted that the repairs must be done such that most users will choose to walk on the path rather than spreading out to the sides. However, this should not be confused with encouraging more people to use that *route* or visit that area: the *objective* of the path work should not normally be to make the path easier than it was before.

Where the aim is to encourage new users by waymarking, bridge building, widening trails and "improving" the path surface this should be discussed with stakeholders in terms of both the design, but also the objectives for that work.

Works should take into consideration the likely effect of the repairs on the numbers visiting the area – the concept of "induced demand" – and the aim should generally be not to directly encourage an increase in the numbers using that route. This is important both in terms of environmental impact in the uplands, but also impacts lower down, including traffic, demand for car parking and other facilities.

Unintended consequences should be considered. For example, on bridleways used by mountain bikers, work that decreases the technical difficulty of the bridleway may lead to increased speeds and resultant greater braking (that may lead to subsequent path damage) and/or conflict with other users. Again, induced demand is a consideration. Lowering the technical difficulty for MB users may mean greater numbers and increased conflict with walkers.

7. Example setting

Organisations should aim to set a good example and be mindful of any precedents that may inadvertently be set, e.g. for private landowners. The risk of setting a misleading precedent can be minimised by ensuring that the rationale for any work is explicitly deliberated with stakeholders in advance.

8. Visual impacts and sense of place

Work should aim to minimise the visual impact of the path to others in the hills, by considering choice of materials, location and routing (e.g. wending around natural features rather than overly straight lines) and vegetation around the path.

9. Path character

As far as possible, repairs should seek to preserve, not diminish, the challenges that the uplands provide, both in terms of terrain and navigation. For example, any signage should be carefully considered and justified, and the works should take into consideration the character of the original path (width, ruggedness) and wherever possible this should be preserved. In particular, path work in the uplands should generally avoid removing bedrock, should use local materials where possible, and encourage the restoration of the (semi-) natural vegetation.

In some cases paths or tracks may have historical or archaeological value, and this should also be taken into consideration.

10. Landscape context

Works should also take into consideration the wider context in which the route is found. We have avoided defining “the uplands”, because most of Eryri can be considered as being “in the uplands” in some sense, and many different factors may influence what is appropriate. Nevertheless, the principles above become even more important with increasing altitude; remoteness from roads, villages etc (which reflects straight line and travel distance, but also sight lines); ruggedness; as well as other factors. What might be appropriate on a path between villages in an inhabited, low level valley, parallel to major roads, might be completely inappropriate on a higher-level path or bridleway, running through uninhabited country.