



# ALDIE BURN ACCESSIBLE TRAIL

## FCS Accessibility Case Studies

Aldie Burn, near Tain in Easter Ross, is a popular forest centred on a burn that once powered several watermills. In 2013, the Burn Trail was improved to meet the Countryside for All Standard, ensuring that the forest can offer all visitors the opportunity to enjoy this beautiful part of the Highlands.

The project was one of a number undertaken in recent years to improve the visitor offer as well as the accessibility of Scotland's National Forest Estate for all potential visitors.

This Case Study describes the project and looks at some of the challenges we encountered along the way. It suggests a number of key learning points: we hope our experience will help others to be equally or even more successful.



## BACKGROUND

Between 2011 and 2013, Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) worked with the Fieldfare Trust and other specialist accessibility advisors to review recreation provision on the National Forest Estate, focussing on opportunities for disabled visitors. This assessment was driven by a number of health and recreation policies, including the newly-implemented Equality Act 2010.

The review included access surveys at key visitor sites throughout Scotland. Over 200 kms of trails were surveyed and 18 phototrails ([www.phototrails.org](http://www.phototrails.org)) were produced. The network of forest trails that were already “badged” as accessible to all were an important focus: we wanted to identify which of them met current specifications for accessible paths (see the end of this case study), and which might have fallen below the standard through the passage of time, erosion or other factors. We could then make decisions about improving existing routes, “de-badging” trails that were no longer fully accessible, renewed promotion of accessible trails, and the potential for developing new trails.



**Aldie Burn is a popular venue for events like cycle rallies.**

**“The most common factors leading to less than full accessibility were linear gradient, in most cases because of the route selected, and a lack of seats and resting areas.”**

**From the FCS trail audit**



**Although the original trails had been built to a high standard, features like this trail entrance created access problems.**

We also focussed on key forests with special landscape experiences that were already popular, but that did not offer fully inclusive access. That meant they could potentially exclude a large number of potential visitors: about 830,000 disabled adults live in Scotland, representing 1 in 7 of the population. And because most people follow “the line of least resistance” when out in the countryside, making sure trails are as accessible as possible benefits everyone.

The results of the survey mean FCS is now in a better position to make strategic decisions about improvements and investments in accessible trails. We want to increase the number of Scots who are physically active, and make sure that the experiences offered at our sites can be shared and enjoyed by all, whatever their age or ability.

### CHALLENGES AT ALDIE BURN

The waymarked forest walks at Aldie Burn were originally created in the 1980s. Following some upgrading work, they were promoted as “all abilities” trails just after the turn of the millennium. However, when they were surveyed in October 2011, they were among a number of trails in North Highland Forest District that were found not to meet current accessibility standards. We decided to remove the all ability “badging”, but made it a high priority to ensure there was some fully accessible provision in the district.

Aldie Burn was a good candidate. It is a popular local recreation spot, and there are few other fully accessible countryside or forest walks nearby. The site offers a unique and positive visitor experience, but is not promoted exclusively for its accessibility. If they are to be truly successful for both provider and visitor, fully accessible trails must be among the most popular trails for all visitors to a site, and fully integrated with the immediate trail network.

Surveys showed that when the the Burn Trail (2 miles / 3.2 km) was originally built, it did almost achieve the Countryside for All Standard. The key exceptions were some linear gradient stretches and the almost complete lack of seating along the trail. The surface had deteriorated a little in some areas, especially through erosion on the steeper sections, and vegetation growth had reduced the original usable width in places. But the original path construction had been to a very good standard. This meant there was a solid foundation for the significant upgrade needed to create the new trail, and it also made access for construction plant and materials a lot easier.



The surface of the trails had eroded in places, and the gradients were too steep for current easy access standards.

### PLANNING THE TRAILS

In Forestry Commission Scotland’s business planning cycle, most projects of this scale are conceived and approved up to two years in advance, with a more detailed plan the following year. For the Aldie Burn project, £50,000 was allocated in the Ross-shire business plan in 2011/12.

A comprehensive access survey of the existing trails was undertaken by specialist consultants, with FCS staff shadowing the work. Developing accessibility specifications to this degree of rigour was new to some of the staff involved in the project, but working with a specialist meant there was greater confidence in the FCS team about what was required before letting a contract for the works.

North Highland Forest District had an existing medium-term contract with Cross Country Contracting to deliver most of the district’s recreation-related Civil Engineering works. An arrangement like this makes it possible to develop an open, professional working relationship with a contractor, leading to more effective outcomes, better quality, and more satisfaction for all concerned. The Aldie Burn project fell within the terms of this contract, so we could build on a proven track record of quality construction.



In summer 2012, Cross Country Contracting was asked to quote for the path upgrade, with work to begin in autumn 2013: the forest around Aldie Burn is a Special Protection Area for capercaillie, so no work could be carried out during spring and summer. The sum quoted was £56,000, slightly higher than the original budget allocation, so a sum of £60,000 was put into the 2013/14 budget.



Careful phasing kept the disruption caused by the work to a minimum, and good communication with visitors helped them understand what was happening.



## WALK AND TALK BEFORE WORK

The construction programme was scheduled for October and November 2013. Specific elements such as special treatments for forest road crossings, and the installation of seating and resting places, were to be completed after the main construction.

Given the importance and profile the project would have within the district, and recognising the learning potential for the FCS project managers, the original accessibility consultant was re-engaged for a further site visit in August 2013. A full “walk and talk” survey of the trails was carried out by a group including the FCS project manager, the contractor’s manager and operator, and the access consultant. This walk and talk survey was important to the project’s success. It meant a small additional expense, but at about 1% of the budget it was an efficient and effective use of resources.

The construction work lasted about six weeks and naturally caused some significant disruption to the usual visitor experience. By phasing and zoning the work we managed to avoid fully closing the trails at any point during the contract. A particularly positive outcome was the communication between visitors and the project manager and contractor during the work. Sharing information with visitors about the aims, plans and reasoning behind such improvements is important: it helps visitors understand what is happening on an individual site, and builds support for future projects.

We arranged for a quality control “sign-off” on the trail surface finish at an early stage, so the project manager and the contractor could proceed with confidence. The established good relationship with the contractor made it easy to discuss issues as they arose, as well as solutions and modifications, sometimes at the contractor’s suggestion. These enhanced the project and came at no additional cost to the budget.



## THE ALDIE BURN TRAIL

The site now has fully accessible trails that can be actively and confidently promoted as accessible to the whole community. It will take a little time for the new construction to soften visually in the landscape, and for additional features to be implemented, but visitors seem delighted.

Building this accessible trail didn't really involve any increase in the cost of materials compared with any other path construction project. It did, however, require time and care in preparation, design, management, and working relationships. It probably cost more per linear metre than a "standard" trail, but our experience (and seemingly that of our visitors) suggests this "extra" investment will more than pay for itself.



It's important to get cross gradients right, especially at path junctions.



**"Headed out today to Aldie Burn with a big group of dogs, lots of adults, kids, a wee one in a pram and a wheelchair user, all in the pouring rain and wow – your new path really stood the test."**

Visitor comment  
on Highland Dogblog



## KEY LEARNING POINTS

- Appraise the accessible trail within the context of the local access network. Ensure that it is or will be integrated with the local network rather than an addition to it.
- Get to know your trail thoroughly. Undertake a comprehensive assess survey before tendering a contract.
- Consult and share your project with current and potential visitors.
- Clear, accurate information is important in helping people decide whether to visit a site and how well they would be able to use it once there. Provide information in accessible formats, off-site and on-site, that allows people to decide for themselves.
- Make a high-quality track record a key criterion for choosing contractors.
- Let your contractor know about the reasoning behind the trail development, and the importance of adhering to the Countryside for All Standard.
- Don't rely on the contractor understanding what you want from the contract documentation alone. "Walk and Talk" the trail with them before work starts on the ground.
- Establish agreed quality control standards as soon as possible. Make building a test section of trail a first stage in the construction programme.
- Have a clear, open and regular communication with the contractor throughout the process.
- Listen to the contractor and be prepared to learn from their experience.
- Develop your skills in contract management (including the Clerk of Works role) and/or ensure you have back-up and support for this task.
- Don't be afraid to cost in specialist support for any relevant part of the process.
- Keep paper and photographic records throughout: they make valuable learning resources.

### Countryside for All

Standards for paths that will make the countryside accessible for all, published by the Fieldfare Trust, were developed through the BT Countryside for All project. The standards cover specifications for features such as surface, width, gradient and cross slope.

Because people expect different types of path in different countryside settings, the standards are designed to help you develop accessible paths that are appropriate and sympathetic to the location. Near towns and around intensively managed sites, for example, people expect better paths than they would in open country or wild land.

You'll find details of the standards on the Fieldfare Trust's website at [www.fieldfare.org.uk/?page\\_id=48](http://www.fieldfare.org.uk/?page_id=48). The first step is to assess the right setting for your site through a few simple questions that will help you place it in the "Urban and formal", "Urban fringe and managed" or "Rural and working landscape" category. You can then download detailed path specifications for the relevant category.

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