

Twenty Years on

A survey of Scottish access authorities in 2025

20 years after statutory access rights
commenced

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support and guidance from members of the Scottish Outdoor
Access Network (SOAN)

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Access authorities in 2025

Key points

In late 2025 a working group set up by the Scottish Outdoor Access Network (SOAN) oversaw an online survey of access authorities in Scotland carried out by Gavin Corbett of Ramblers Scotland. All 34 access authorities responded. The main findings are as follows.

1. There are 33 full time equivalent access officers in Scotland: fewer than at any time since the Land Reform Act of 2003 was commenced in 2005, being cut in half over 20 years.

- The rate of attrition since the last survey in 2020 has slowed.
- But demand has risen, initially during the pandemic but staying high and duties for staff have been expanded.
- 7 access authorities have no access officer.

2. Experience of receiving and handling public queries is mixed and may be an area for shared development or good practice sharing; and potentially national co-ordination of case systems.

3. There is a reported rising number of complaints about basics like path maintenance, blockages and irresponsible access.

4. With the exception of Section 11 orders (usually for short term access restrictions linked to events) most authorities use legal powers sparingly, citing legal risk and cost or, more generally, low familiarity and confidence.

5. The proposed shift of cases from Sheriff Court to the revamped Scottish Land Court is seen as broadly positive for greater expertise and reducing barriers to cases but with some more negative views and uncertainty on the delivery.

6. Half of authorities report that they have not reviewed their core paths plan and most of those report no plans to do so.

7. Most authorities meet the statutory duty to have local access forums (LAFs) in their area but eight currently do not, of which 2 are about to restart. There are some very positive comments on the value of LAFs but also recognition of the resource needed and the need for a re-discovery of core purpose.

8. With a handful of exceptions, authorities report declining or static capital budgets, and investment increasingly focused on active travel at the expense of recreational access; and revenue budgets well short of service need.

- There is evidence of appetite to diversify capital funding but it needs to be sustainable

- There is little consistency on benchmarking what an adequate core revenue budget might be.
- There is limited understanding of the nominal amounts allocated for access in the local government settlement with most authorities saying they spend much less than the nominal allocation.

9. Among the recommendations are:

- Updated guidance from Scottish Government to access authorities
- Development of reporting and casework systems
- Taking stock of where the nation's network of core paths has got to.
- Revamping both resource and capital funding to align with need, demand and benefit.

Land reform legislation on outdoor access was passed in 2003 and commenced in 2005. Twenty years later, would the architects of the proposals be content with progress? Scotland is still held up as a pioneer of access rights and more people than at any time in Scotland's history are taking part in activities in green and blue spaces. But from the practitioners here on the frontline there are warnings of hollowed out capacity, maintenance backlog mounting, unmet potential in the path network and the need for far more education and awareness-raising. There is a sense that government – national and local – has lost sight of the huge economic, social and health benefits of outdoor access. With Scottish elections in 2026 and council elections in 2027 there is an opportunity to put that right.

Introduction

One of the many roles which local authorities fulfil is overseeing arrangements for people to enjoy access to the outdoors for the purposes of recreation and education. As well as the 32 local authorities, both of Scotland's national park authorities have statutory duties on outdoor access. Together they comprise Scotland's 34 "access authorities".

In September and October of 2025 a working group set up by the Scottish Outdoor Access Network (SOAN) oversaw an online survey of access authorities in Scotland. The survey was delivered by Gavin Corbett of Ramblers Scotland¹. All 34 access authorities responded.

1. Who are access officers and what do they do?

What exactly we mean by the access role is important. Although access is a statutory duty, the role fulfilling the duty does not have the formality, machinery or professional development framework that, say, a social worker, housing officer or a teacher has. We asked respondents what their role comprised. There were 5 recurring themes which might be regarded as core to the role

- Meeting and upholding the terms of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 (LRSA) and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC).
- Feeding into strategic land use processes: eg Planning (both development control and strategic) and forestry decisions.
- Path network oversight: eg core paths, rights of way and long-distance trails.
- Supporting Local Access Forums (LAFs).
- Fielding queries and sorting disputes (casework).

Interestingly, education on rights and responsibilities was mentioned only by one authority². Other aspects of the job mentioned more than once include:

- Delivering development planning roles.
- Overseeing active travel or sustainable transport.
- Delivering ranger services and countryside or greenspace management.
- Co-ordinating or taking part in partnerships for visitor management.

¹ Responsibility for the report and conclusions sits solely with the author and Ramblers Scotland and cannot be taken as providing or inferring the views of SOAN or SOAN members.

² This might simply reflect the shift in emphasis to digital tools. Nevertheless, frontline staff do still play a key role in awareness-raising and information.

About half of responding staff (16) have “access” in their job title, of which 11 are mainly access, others in combination with other roles.

Other staff with access remits include rangers, greenspace officers, active travel officers, and planners. In some cases, other staff filled in the survey in the absence of an officer.

There is wide variation of experience in the sector. The length of time in post ranges from 3 months to 30 plus years. Around half of respondents have been in place for more than 10 years. Around a quarter have been in post for 2 years or less.

Seven authorities say they have no access officer³. Of these seven, one discharges some access functions through a third party, while another covers access for only one part of its area through a funded project. In addition to those seven, there are two other access authorities with current vacancies for which they are seeking to recruit.

Five authorities have more than one person – one of which has 4 at the time of the survey and another has a team leader and 2 part time access rangers.

Overall, of course, the presence of access officers is very uneven across the country, but, from the survey the best estimate is that there are 33 full time equivalent (FTE) access officers in Scotland⁴.

This suggests a continued attrition of access officer capacity. Information from 2020 indicates that there were six authorities without an access officer and the equivalent of 36.5 full-time access officers working across Scotland; down 27% from 2015/16 and 44% since 2005/6. To the extent that these data are fully comparable, it means that officer capacity has halved since the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 commenced in 2005; albeit that the rate of attrition in the last 5 years has slowed.

That is consistent with what respondents told us when asked about trends in staff capacity in recent years. An equal number of respondents say capacity has gone down as said it had stayed the same. On the positive side one said:

“Our council has always had a staff member with access role in their remit. We now have 4 staff members who regularly answer access enquiries.”

While another’s feedback was:

³ A small number of authorities said they had no access officer but had staff with other job roles in which access was an assigned part. These have not been included in the seven.

⁴ This is estimated from the information provided. The range is probably between 30-36 with 33 a midpoint. It's assumed that a post is FTE if not clear and PT posts have been assigned a value of 0.5 FTE. Both assumptions might be regarded as optimistic.

“When I started, more than 10 years ago, we had a Senior Access Officer and 2 full time equivalent Access Officers. Now we have one FT Access Officer and some managerial help.”

Only two said capacity had gone up. Looking ahead, most respondents fed back that they do not know of future plans for staffing although most were pessimistic⁵.

Of course, capacity does not exist in a vacuum. Even with static capacity, demand from the public has risen, both during and since the Covid-19 pandemic and many officers report being asked to cover other duties on top of core access roles.

A more recent development has been in the means by which the access role is discharged. It is very common for public authorities to deliver functions via third parties (commercial or not-for-profit). And access authorities can discharge their roles with other parties and, of course, routinely do this for specific work like path maintenance and to a lesser extent legal or survey / consultation work; while partnerships with community groups and charities / third sector are common.

Fife Council and, to a lesser extent, East Ayrshire Council have gone further along the road of delivering the access function via a third party. In Fife, Fife Coast and Countryside Trust (FCCT) employs an access officer to deal with queries as well as staff who cover a wide range of functions, from path maintenance, to rangers to nature protection. The local access forum is also convened by FCCT. The council remains the statutory authority for discharge of legal powers (such as S11 orders – see below).

The East Ayrshire Council model is via East Ayrshire Leisure Trust, which, in common with a number of councils, has set up an arms-length charity to run services like swimming pools, museums and libraries. In East Ayrshire the Trust also delivers the access function through its Countryside Team.

The survey was not designed to explore these models in detail so they are not covered any further here. However, in its programme of practice sharing SOAN might consider hosting further opportunities to find out more.

2. How do access authorities organise their casework?

As above, case management is a core part of the job so we asked how authorities publicised their service and managed casework. For the former, most common was an authority webpage and dedicated email address. Fewer mentioned dedicated phone number. A minority of authorities were less accessible – for example, relying on the

⁵ There might be some pessimism bias in this question given that the knowledge of future staffing plans was limited.

SOAC webpage maintained by NatureScot for people to make contact, using only the authority's generic complaints system or being entirely reactive if issues make their way through the system.

Once an issue is in the system best practice would seek to ensure it is managed efficiently – both from the point of view of the individual case but also to allow aggregate data on volume and nature of demand to be reported. Authorities vary as to when a case becomes a “case”: for example, not logging simple queries. While that is understandable in light of reduced capacity it does mean that estimates of demand will be lower: for example, to report to senior managers or the Local Access Forum.

A handful of authorities do appear to be able to manage data in a fuller way with some using or looking at dedicated systems like CAMS (<https://www.esdm.co.uk/cams-country-side-access>) or GIS packages. Some mention using or adapting the council's own case handling systems. But the most common responses were use of either Outlook or Excel.

There might be scope for some shared development (potentially via SOAN) on case management, although the scale of access casework does mean that systems development has to be proportionate to need.

One experienced access officer has mooted the idea of a national reporting system. That officer argues that many people are not sure which LA area they are in so don't know to whom to report issues. This is compounded, it is argued, by inaccurate reporting of the location. The officer goes on:

“The biggest issue is that many people will be aware that a gate should not be locked but they do not know where to report it, or how to go about it and this is a significant barrier for most. The more an individual must do to report an issue the less likely that they are to do so.

“A potential solution is that NatureScot or another national organisation sets up an online reporting system, which uses a GIS based reporting form to allow users to submit details of signs and obstructions, including locations and photographs, ideally whilst at the location, which are then sent on to the individual access authorities to deal with. This would streamline the process for members of the public and ensure that complaints go to the correct access authority with as much information as possible.

“If the information is provided to access authorities in GIS format, they could then use a GIS system to manage issues. I use a GIS to manage the process and triage them based on the number of reports and whether they affect a Core Path, Public Right of Way, or

the general right of access. The system is straightforward and allows me to justify why some issues get priority and others may never be dealt with.

“There are several advantages of doing this. One is that the national organisation would be able to see any developing patterns i.e. deer fencing around newly planted woodlands, solar farms. These could then trigger the development of advice and guidance for land managers before the problem becomes significantly greater. The national organisation should be able to monitor the progress made by individual access authorities with resolving issues and ideally report this back to the National Access Forum and Scottish Ministers. If individual local authorities do not have sufficient resources to manage the number of access issues in their area it might help to justify additional spending. If a significant number of issues are reported as not progressing because the LA is not willing to issue a S14 Notice because of the potential legal costs, this might persuade the Scottish Government that something needs to change regarding how these issues are dealt with.”

It is fair to say that this is the view of one officer and may prompt a range of different views among other practitioners.

What are cases about?

Finally, on casework, we asked an open question on trends in recent years. The single most frequent issue mentioned is the rise in complaints on poor maintenance or condition of paths (from vegetation growth to vanishing bridges), along with blocked access or access excluded. Other issues include rights of way queries⁶, deer fencing, and commercial events.

There is general agreement on there having been a spike in footfall during the COVID-19 pandemic when travel further afield was restricted. And most officers also feel that footfall levels have remained higher than pre-pandemic, although the extent to which this is the case varies⁷.

Some authorities also mention issues in relation to irresponsible access – anti-social behaviour, litter, dogs not in control and disruptive camping.

⁶ Uniquely in Scotland, public rights of way or core paths are not recorded on OS maps. All access authorities have core path maps of varying quality (and NatureScot hosts a basic national core path map) but only some show rights of way.

⁷ Nationally collected data confirm 2020 and 2021 spikes in outdoor access but tend to show levels remaining above pre-pandemic levels even since. The scale of growth creates extra demand in itself, of course, but also constitutes new audiences to reach with messages on opportunities, rights and responsibilities.

3. Powers and duties

The LRSA provides access authorities with a range of powers and duties and associated levers.

Probably the most important of those powers is the power under **section 14** of the Act to require a landowner to take or cease action which might impact on public access. In the immediate years following the Act going “live” in 2005 there were some high-profile cases which tested the water, with a general sense that use of section 14 has become relatively infrequent since then.

In 2025, 20 years on, the picture is very mixed. The survey asked about experience of using S14 notices in general rather than, say, over the last year. Just under half of respondents had invoked S14, typically in situations where dialogue had hit an impasse and for problems like locked gates, obstructive fencing, hostile signage or other obstructions.

However, there is huge variation in responses. At one end of the spectrum one authority said:

“We have used pre-section 14 notices on quite a few occasions over the past year mainly on locked gates and non-compliant signs. Usually this is sufficient but, if not, we issue on average 2-3 section 14 notices each year and these have resulted in the landowner complying with the legislation.”

This kind of appetite is unusual, however. More common is for authorities to use the existence of S14 powers as a means of giving negotiation teeth. This has credibility if the authority has used or shows that it is prepared to follow through on use of those powers. However, a minority of officers don’t feel that they have that credibility. One authority cited an issue mentioned by a few respondents as follows:

“There is no willingness to threaten S14 orders from managers. I submitted a report to my line manager requesting authority to serve a notice in [DATE SOME TIME AGO] and I am still waiting for a final decision. It is likely that the decision will be to take no further action because of the risk of legal action which the Council cannot afford.”

This is an area that needs explored further. Attitudes to use of S14 powers are linked to officer familiarity and confidence, coupled with perception of limited managerial, political or legal team backing. It is these factors rather than commonality of circumstances which drive practice. While there is general agreement that statutory powers are best used sparingly, it’s at least arguable that the current level of use erodes confidence in the compliance machinery.

Section 14 is far from the only enforcement tool. **Section 28** of the Act is sometimes seen as the companion piece in allowing third parties to go to Sheriff Court to seek

clarity on whether or how access rights apply on land. Only 4 respondents had any experience of that and not recently. It remains a very underused part of the legislation.

At the time of the survey the Scottish Parliament was seeking views on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill which includes a proposal to transfer S14 and S28 cases from Sheriff Court to Scottish Land Court⁸. Most respondents felt insufficiently briefed on the proposal to offer comment, although, of those that did, the feedback was mostly positive, on the basis that it had the potential to reduce barriers and cost.

“I welcome the proposed transfer of Section 14 and Section 28 cases to the expanded Scottish Land Court, as outlined in the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill. The move has the potential to improve consistency, efficiency, and specialist handling of access disputes, particularly where land management and public rights intersect. Access cases often involve nuanced interpretation of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and land use practices, and a dedicated forum may offer better-informed outcomes than the generalist Sheriff Court. However, it will be important to ensure that the new court remains accessible to the public and local authorities, both procedurally and geographically.”

There were some counter views or caveats, however:

“I think this would be potentially a retrograde step and give landowners more leeway to avoid compliance. However, I do recognise that Sheriff Courts are over stretched.”

“The Land Court needs to recruit some new members from stakeholder groups with an interest in public access and an understanding of the issues. They may also need members with an experience of urban areas. - This might become a Land Access Court! For local authorities the potential costs need to be significantly lower than the Sheriff Court, ideally fixed. This might lead to significantly more issues being referred to the Land Court. It is possible that S.28 issues may be directly referred by land and property owners and even some members of the public.”

Turning to other levers in the legislation, there is relatively common use of **section 11** of the Act, with all but 6 respondents citing use. S11 allows access authorities to suspend access rights for up to 2 years but typically for much shorter periods (1-5 days) on specific parcels of land to accommodate a wide range of commercial, community, sporting or cultural events. One or two authorities cite requests for more extensive use of S11.

⁸ The stage 1 report on the Bill was issued on 19.12.25

<https://digitalpublications.parliament.scot/Committees/Report/RAI/2025/12/19/ba91200f-0111-4024-99cc-7312f0798a00#Introduction>

“I have been asked re excluding large areas for powerline construction, operation of a visitor attraction and other purposes from time to time all of which have been declined.”

By contrast, **section 12** of the Act allows authorities to introduce byelaws which impact on the way land is used or managed for access. When asked about this, two or three authorities mention management rules on country parks or green spaces but it appears that there is still only one use of S12 to curtail access rights, from over a decade ago, at the Crawick Multiverse in Nithsdale. At the time of writing Scottish Borders Council has approved a S12 byelaw for just over 200ha of land for a Center Parcs development north of Hawick and this is now with Scottish Ministers for consideration.

One of the two national parks has byelaws on camping and use of the main loch; while the other is about to introduce a seasonal byelaw on outdoor fires from April 2026. However, these are not using S12 powers and they seek to regulate certain activities associated with access, not access as a whole. Other authorities have considered using S12 for issues such as fires or camping but have not been taken forward or, in the case of the Highland Spaceport, the development has not materialised. One of the issues which local authorities cite with byelaws is the capacity to enforce.

There are a range of other powers and duties in the LRSA. **Section 13** gives broad duties and powers in relation to access and **Section 19** provides for similar in relation to core paths. Of the specific remaining levers, the most common is use of **Section 21** for path agreements (although two authorities also mention using **Section 22** path orders); and use of **Section 15** to regulate access on dangerous sites.

4. Core paths

There are over 22,000km of core paths in Scotland. Nine respondents said they did not know what that number was in their own area – although to be fair that might be a reflection on the range of people who were responding rather than the relevant authority itself not knowing.

Core paths plans were expected to be developed over a period of 3 years following the commencement of the 2003 Act and typically rolled out in the period 2008-12, although many took longer. As time passes, paths change, as do patterns of demand, so the Act allows for review of the core paths plan as well as a power for ministers to direct a review (a power never used so far)⁹.

Authorities may review a plan if they consider it appropriate to do so for the purpose of ensuring that the core paths plan continues to give the public reasonable access throughout their area.

⁹ As far as we know unless any authority can correct us!

Given that 20 years has now passed it is perhaps surprising that half of respondents (17) say they have never reviewed their core paths plan. Furthermore, of those 17 who had not reviewed, 11 (a third of all authorities) said they had no plans to do so, citing staff capacity and funding as the main reasons. One authority said

“With the reduction in the number of staff I have been advised that this will only happen if directed by the Scottish Government. Even then funding might be required for any additional resources.”

While there might be some caution about those findings (it is possible that there has been review in the past which current respondents just did not know about), it is unlikely that staff drafting plans in 2008 expected that those plans would have quite such a long shelf-life.

Of the remaining half of authorities, about 5 or 6 were currently engaged in review or preparing for one. Those who carried out a review described it in various ways from full review to terms like “mini-review” or part-area reviews.

The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 introduced processes for access authorities to amend individual core paths. Although intended to be lighter touch, most respondents say that they have not engaged with it, with one citing it as cumbersome and another seeking guidance¹⁰. Three authorities said they were seeking to deal with individual paths as part of full core paths plan review. Against that another authority said:

“We have made a few individual amendments to the core paths plan to divert paths for land management reasons. It seemed easy enough!”

There is potentially some confusion on when the process needs to be used. As one authority said

“The streamlined procedure is welcome although unused. Most single amendments are connected to planning applications and stopped up and diverted through that legislation.”

Despite that, other authorities allude to using the process as part of planning decisions.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that core paths remain one of the big unfulfilled parts of the LRSA. They remain unmarked on OS maps, inconsistently signed, very different in scale and density between areas, hugely variable in quality (to the point of not existing at all) and at risk of becoming detached from changing patterns of use.

¹⁰ This is one area where the 2005 guidance to access authorities is obviously out of date.

5. Local Access Forums (LAFs)

Section 25 of the LRSA requires access authorities to establish a local access forum (or more than one if it chooses).

26 authorities report having a LAF. One authority has six LAFs.

Despite it being a statutory duty, six authorities say they do not have a LAF with a further two on the cusp of restarting¹¹. For those with no current LAF, in one case, it is 2010 since a LAF last met. Of those who gave information on the number of meetings the following was reported.

Number of LAF meetings in last year	No. of authorities
One	1
Two	3
Three	4
Four or more	12

Two authorities which report having a LAF say that, nevertheless, it has not met over the last year, although one says it was consulted on a section 11 decision.

LAFs deal with a wide range of issues. The most common responses are about casework: path maintenance, disputes, individual planning applications, core path changes, path user conflict, pavement parking and disabled access are all mentioned. Some also highlight strategic engagement including Core Paths Plan review, Local Development Plan, active travel plans and recreation plans. One sought LAF views on a possible legal case¹².

There were some very positive comments about the value of LAFs as a separate source of advice. Good LAFs are important but need capacity to support.

“Effective LAFs are resource hungry - you get out what you put in! There is a fine balance between ensuring they have genuinely useful work to do and just keeping them busy to ensure they're 'match fit' and engaged when you might need them. If they're not well-informed there's a danger that, when invited to provide advice, they provide an unhelpful response. I would say our LAF is working quite well, but it can feel very time-consuming if admin support is not available, so ensuring a LAF is properly resourced with admin support and a steady stream of genuine case work and/or consultations, is the key.”

¹¹ Leaving aside the overall statutory duty there are a number of parts of the LRSA – eg longer term S11 orders or introducing byelaws or amending core paths which legally require a LAF to be engaged.

¹² While the survey was being carried out the annual meeting of the National Access Forum (NAF) and LAFs took place. Similar issues were raised including a perceived rise in locked gates and hostile signage; anti-social behaviour; and obstructive deer fencing. For LAFs themselves, capacity of local authorities to support, recruitment of members and training were all raised as issues.

A number of authorities highlight issues with numbers and attendance, and, in particular, it being hard to get landowners involved. A recurring theme is that engagement was easier in the “early days” when core path plans were being developed and new powers and duties tested. The implication is that LAFs will fulfil their role more fully when there is real substance with which to engage.

6. Funding

Funding is the most difficult area to cover in a broad-ranging survey and certainly merits an investigation in its own right. Funding is so fragmented in access and respondents are not always the people within authorities who know most about budgets. So the survey only captures a flavour of funding themes¹³.

For **capital funding**, the overall picture is of less funding or static budgets being eroded by high levels of inflation and reduced capacity of suppliers. A small number of authorities (3 or 4) report positive trends in capital funding. A few others report static budgets, while 6 say they have no capital budgets at all. The biggest recurring theme is switch in money away from access and recreational paths to active travel projects.

“External capital funding is all about active travel routes and it is so difficult to find any funding for simple paths”

“Capital funding has largely been available for Active Travel Paths but not recreational paths.”

“There is virtually no money for traditional outdoor access, all the money is focused on active travel.”

There is some overlap between recreational access and active travel, of course. Some infrastructure serves both purposes, especially closer to urban areas. Without a detailed project by project inventory, it’s hard to assess the degree of overlap but it is unlikely to be extensive.

“In a rural context active travel funding is too restrictive both in terms of specifications and deliverables. There is now no funding for upland path works or large-scale rural path capital projects such as bridges.”

A few authorities highlighted the suspension of Improving Public Access Grants in the farming payments system since 2022 (and no funding so far in the Rural Support Plan). In light of the squeeze on core capital some authorities mention finding other sources: renewables money, Lottery project money, biodiversity money (or Nature Restoration

¹³ The survey reports the views of all 34 access authorities. But funding is a big area where there is difference between local authorities and national park authorities. The funding mechanism is different and NPAs, while hardly funding rich, are in a stronger position to resource access, with relatively fewer competing demands than local authorities.

Fund), developer contributions or one-off funds. However, there is also caution about seeking these sources as one-offs or opportunistic without looking to maintenance of assets.

There is a consequence to funding shortages.

“The Council has faced increasing challenges in maintaining existing assets, particularly bridges, culverts, and surfaced paths, due to limited capital for lifecycle replacement and structural repairs. Inflation and contractor costs have further eroded the value of available funding.”

The feedback on **revenue budgets** is even bleaker.

“Revenue funding has been cut annually for path networks, despite the fact that for a tiny fraction of Council budget the path network provides an amazing asset for locals and visitors.”

and

“My revenue budget is currently less than 10K and has been for the past 5 years. I have been inundated with complaints this year and the core path network is deteriorating. As a single officer with no operational support, this is very demoralising. I am the third officer in the last 5 years.”

Only one authority highlighted a positive trend in revenue funding, while a handful of others reported they were getting by. Some said that they were dealing with maintenance only on a reactive or emergency basis. Three authorities mentioned the potential of visitor levy revenue funding both capital works and maintenance of paths; as well as visitor focused work of rangers. The first levy goes live in Edinburgh in 2026 but at the moment only a small minority of councils are actively pursuing levies¹⁴.

In order to ground the perceptions of budgets against some sort of benchmark the survey provided the Grant Aided Expenditure figures for each local authority.

¹⁴ Visit Scotland keeps a running tally of schemes in the pipeline <https://www.visitscotland.org/tourism-events-industry/visitor-levy#proposed>

	GAE 2025-26 (ie 2008-09) baseline £000	2025-26 equivalent if inflation applied £000
Aberdeen City	215	329
Aberdeenshire	432	661
Angus	176	269
Argyll & Bute	525	804
City of Edinburgh	455	697
Clackmannanshire	79	121
Dumfries & Galloway	472	723
Dundee City	147	225
East Ayrshire	171	262
East Dunbartonshire	112	171
East Lothian	150	230
East Renfrewshire	99	152
Falkirk	224	343
Fife	541	828
Glasgow City	524	802
Highland	632	968
Inverclyde	92	141
Midlothian	122	187
Moray	167	256
Na h-Eileanan Siar	70	107
North Ayrshire	169	259
North Lanarkshire	351	537
Orkney Islands	116	178
Perth & Kinross	463	709
Renfrewshire	201	308
Scottish Borders	298	456
Shetland Islands	94	144
South Ayrshire	162	248
South Lanarkshire	442	677
Stirling	128	196
West Dunbartonshire	91	139
West Lothian	180	276
Total	8100	12403

The setting of local authority budgets and how they are distributed is a complex matter and can't be done justice here. When the grant settlement is provided to local authorities it is completely up to each authority as part of its own budget setting to determine how much goes to access matters and indeed how they distribute that across all the different functions that might make up what we call "access". The money is not ear-marked or protected in any way.

In the survey we only provided the numbers in the first column above as the second column is purely illustrative – this is simply showing what the value of 2008-09 figures is in 2025-26 terms. So, if South Ayrshire has an allocation of £162,000, for example, it should actually be spending £248,000 to make it of the same value as it was when set in 2008-09 (broadly the way that GAE deals with inflation is in aggregate form rather than annually revisiting each of the 2008 baseline figures).

The survey showed the nominal amount included in the council's annual funding settlement from the Scottish Government for access issues¹⁵. It asked “do you recognise the figure and how does it compare to your actual spend?”

Given the above complexity, it is not surprising that only a minority of authorities (8) were aware of the numbers. Only 3 said that they thought the number was close to actual spend once salaries are included. One authority said they spent more than the figure. However, even in those cases, bear in mind that authorities are commenting on a 2008-09 baseline figure so even if Anywhere Council says that £200k seems about right, if that had been inflation-proofed, it should be about 50% higher – ie £300k by the time 2025-26 is arrived at. More typical responses are:

“The Council's budget for Access is 12.5% of the GAE figure.”

“I recognise the figure but would estimate we spend around 1/4 of that directly on access work,”

“Our actual budget is about 1/3 of the figure allocated.”

Within the Green Book formula, land access is the main focus here. However, within the allocation there are pots for parks and open spaces and a much smaller amount for biodiversity and ranger services and it's possible that some of this money is used for outdoor access too, although the same caveat applies around the funding not being earmarked. So, given the complexity of defining what is in scope when we discuss “access” these are no more than illustrative. However, it would take an optimist to claim that the outdoor access function is a net beneficiary of the GAE process.

¹⁵ The figures were taken from the Land Access sheet of the Leisure and Recreation section of the Local Government Green Book <https://scotland.shinyapps.io/sg-scottish-local-government-finance-green-book-2025-26/>. The amounts are those given in the first column in the table above and have remained the same since 2008-09. This does not necessarily mean that actual funding within councils for access has been static since 2008-09. The global amount going to all LAs for all services has increased since 2008-09 so, other things being equal, the amount going to land access could go up in line with that (the final column of the table above illustrates what that might look like if proofed for general inflation). However, there is no requirement on LAs to do so and it is extremely unlikely that any will do so. In practice, LAs are entirely free to go up or down from the 2008-09 baseline.

The significant reductions in officer capacity reported above and the decline in resource spending highlight that there is a problem in ensuring that an adequate amount is allocated to core outdoor access functions. It would be useful to seek to model and cost what a reasonably functioning outdoor access function looks like across a range of authorities.

7. Recommendations

The survey is a snapshot in late 2025, largely of access officers' views on how well arrangements for outdoor access are working, coupled with available data, twenty years after the main legislation on access was commenced. The 100% return rate of the survey in itself shows that this is a sector engaged and committed to making the system work despite reported pressures on budgets and capacity.

In Scotland we are fond of saying we have among the best outdoor access rights in the world. But that is only a meaningful claim if we have ways of working which turn legal rights and responsibilities into day-to-day reality. This survey is only one part of the picture. It focuses on the legal framework from the LRSA 2003 and not, for example, on the role of countryside rangers. And it is solely based on access authorities when, of course, national government and agencies, funding regimes like farm payments and representative organisations have a key role to play too.

Within that context, the following recommendations are made as meriting further development:

- 7.1 Statutory guidance to access authorities dates from 2005 and badly needs refreshed and updated.
- 7.2 The updated guidance should be accompanied by re-introduction of annual monitoring of access authorities, either by Scottish Government (or NatureScot if resourced to do so).
- 7.3 As well as the guidance there is merit in developing a shared template of what the core roles of an access authority are, both as a guide to good practice and as a means of assessing resource requirements.
- 7.4 There is significant scope for developing systems for handling public queries and casework handling, from user testing of responsiveness to queries, through common casework systems through to looking at options for a national portal for queries.
- 7.5 Assuming the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill passes in this parliament, new guidance is needed and it would create an opportune time, more generally, to assess the effectiveness of the legal powers in the LRSA.
- 7.6 Local Access Forums are valued by access authorities but would benefit from being given a second wind – potentially around core path review or other local opportunities for taking stock.
- 7.7 There should be shared reflection – perhaps via an event - on what is next for core paths. How are they mapped and signed? How are they maintained? And how are they reviewed?

7.8 The development of third-party models for discharging access functions should be an area of further investigation and shared learning.

7.9 Funding arrangements are in urgent need of review. The continuing attrition of access officer capacity is not sustainable.

- As in 7.3 above a basic model of access authority functions needs to be developed with associated costs.
- For capital, the commitment of officers to innovate and diversify is commendable and should be built upon but would provide much greater and longer-term benefit if anchored alongside modest annual capital funding for access infrastructure, both in medium term and, more immediately, for example, in the farming payment system.

Land reform legislation on outdoor access was passed in 2003 and commenced in 2005. Twenty years later, would the architects of the proposals be content with progress? Scotland is still held up as a pioneer of access rights and more people than at any time in Scotland's history are taking part in activities in green and blue spaces. But from the practitioners here on the frontline there are warnings of hollowed out capacity, maintenance backlog mounting, unmet potential in the path network and the need for far more education and awareness-raising. There is a sense that government – national and local – has lost sight of the huge economic, social and health benefits of outdoor access. With Scottish elections in 2026 and council elections in 2027 there is an opportunity to put that right.