

Strangford Lough

A strategy for sustainable development

SUMMARY REPORT

Prepared, November 1998, on behalf of Ards Borough Council, Down District Council, Environment & Heritage Service, Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Planning Service, and the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, with advice from the Strangford Lough Management Committee and consultation with local interests, by Scott Wilson Resource Consultants, 7 Mentone Gardens, Edinburgh, EH9 2DJ.

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Introduction

Strangford Lough is an important resource for people and wildlife. In recognition of this importance six of the organisations who are involved in the use and management of the area have commissioned a strategy for sustainable development. They are: Ards Borough Council, Down District Council, Environment & Heritage Service, Northern Ireland Tourist Board, the Planning Service and the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. Advice has also been provided by the Strangford Lough Management Committee.

Why is a strategy necessary?

Many coastal communities and organisations throughout the UK have recognised the value of developing an integrated approach to the use and management of coastal areas. These strategies help to avoid conflict by balancing demand for resources, and ensuring that the needs of all users are considered in the management process.

What is the role of the strategy?

The strategy is not a statutory document, but is designed to inform and guide the work of the commissioning bodies and other interested parties. It provides an overarching framework within which organisations may wish to develop more detailed management programmes (e.g. detailed tourism plans for the area). It presents an integrated approach for the sustainable development of recreation, tourism and other economic activity for Strangford Lough and its hinterland.

How was the strategy prepared?

The strategy has been prepared on behalf of the commissioning bodies by consultants over a two year period. It has been developed following a review of existing information, some new survey work and widespread consultation (see Box 1). The implications and requirements of relevant statutory and policy initiatives at the international, UK and Province level have also been considered.

What are the objectives & recommendations of the strategy?

Objectives have been defined for topics addressed by the strategy and for each objective a series of recommendations is presented.

Planning Framework

Area Plans provide the framework for land-based development around the Lough, and these are now due for review. Their development will be guided by “The Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland” and the Northern Ireland Regional Strategic Framework consultation document - “Shaping our Future”. An analysis of planning applications shows that the major built development in areas around the Lough relates to single dwellings in rural settings. The implications of this in terms of landscape and transport requirements in the area require consideration. Ways of accommodating small scale businesses within settlements was also identified as an issue.

Objective

To ensure that Area Plans are sensitive to the needs of the local community, historic and natural heritage features of the area, and allow for the sustainable use of resources.

Recommendations

- Strangford Lough should be treated as a single entity within an overall Area Plan.
- Countryside Policy Areas should be defined in areas where development pressure is harming landscape quality.
- Development areas adjacent to existing settlements and dispersed rural communities should be identified to provide for further appropriate development within the area.

Survey and Monitoring

Although Strangford Lough is perhaps one of the best studied marine areas in the Province, there are still large gaps in our knowledge of the area. This includes a lack of quantifiable information about the impacts of particular activities upon the local environment.

Objective

To obtain accurate information about the condition and status of the area's physical and biological features, their interaction and changes in status over time.

Recommendations

- Existing survey and monitoring regimes should be reviewed, gaps identified, and programmes designed to fill these.
- A mechanism for the co-ordination of monitoring effort, and the sharing of information should be established.

Public Awareness, Understanding and Participation

Whilst some people have a good understanding of the special importance of Strangford Lough, other users and visitors may be unaware of its special or protected features. Many organisations are currently involved in promoting and managing the Lough, but much of this information lacks a common identity or approach.

Objective

To raise people's awareness, understanding and appreciation of all features of human and wildlife interest in and around Strangford Lough, and to provide better opportunities for their participation in the management of the area.

Recommendations

- Conservation groups, the District Councils, and other interested statutory and voluntary groups (eg. Planning Service, Environment & Heritage Service, National Trust) should work together to produce co-ordinated information about Strangford Lough and its importance.
- The value of establishing a Strangford Lough “Ranger” Service should be considered.
- The role of Codes of Practice in the sustainable management of Strangford Lough should be reviewed and extended.
- Further mechanisms should be developed to improve the exchange of information with local communities and to provide opportunities for discussion about management issues.

Physical Condition

The physical conditions in and around the Lough are responsible for much of its special character. Aspects such as coastal defence works, diffuse sources of pollution and discharges of sewage can all affect these conditions.

Objective

To maintain or improve the physical condition and natural processes of Strangford Lough and Environs (including landscape, water movement and quality, sediment patterns etc.).

Recommendations

- Environmental appraisals should be conducted prior to the introduction of developments or activities which may affect physical and/or biological conditions in the Lough.

Management Mechanisms

A range of different organisations, groups and individuals are involved in managing various aspects of Strangford Lough and the surrounding area. The strategy has considered how existing mechanisms for liaison and management might be improved, and built upon.

Objective

To maintain or improve effective management mechanisms for Strangford Lough and its areas, through the promotion of better communication and co-ordination between different organisations to ensure that they are working towards a sustainable future for the area’s human, natural and economic resources.

Recommendations

- An informal liaison group should be established to work alongside existing bodies. This group would include those organisations which have major executive responsibilities for the management of Strangford Lough.

Nature Conservation

Strangford Lough is of international and national importance for its marine communities and bird life. The area is covered by a number of statutory designations which place obligations in terms of the management of the area. These obligations include the production of a prescriptive conservation plan to safeguard the features of international importance. This plan is currently being prepared. It is important that the strategy provides a wider context for sustainable development around the area whilst allowing compliance with statutory requirements and the proposals of the conservation plan.

Objective

To maintain, enhance and/or restore features of nature conservation interest present in and around Strangford Lough.

Recommendations

- A consistent approach to the management of Strangford Lough should be promoted through the sustainable development strategy and the detailed conservation plan being prepared for the Special Protection Area (SPA) and candidate Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

- Active management programmes should be introduced as necessary, to maintain and enhance features of conservation importance in the Lough and surrounding countryside.
- Measures to minimise the risk of the introduction of further non-native invasive species should be reviewed and any gaps in procedures identified and addressed. Eradication programmes for those which are currently present should be considered.
- Closer working links should be established between organisations working around Strangford Lough to co-ordinate conservation activities.
- Opportunities for the sustainable use of the resources of the area should be identified through research and monitoring studies.
- Measures which enhance or maintain the nature conservation (and landscape) value of the surrounding countryside should be supported and introduced.
- Information about existing designations covering Strangford Lough, the features for which they have been selected, and the implications of designation should be prepared in a readily accessible form.

Landscape and Heritage

The national importance of the attractive rural character of the Strangford Lough area has been recognised through its designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Landscape is a dynamic feature, and one of the issues facing managers of the area is how to accommodate changes without damaging this special character. As a first step a landscape character assessment of the area was undertaken. Fifteen areas of distinctive character have been identified and for each of these the main characteristic features of the area, and the type and scale of development which they are most likely to be able to accommodate have been considered.

Objective

To ensure that the special character and qualities of the Strangford Lough landscape are understood, sustained, enjoyed and strengthened through positive enhancement, and to promote conservation and restoration of traditional buildings and structures in the landscape and features of special architectural or historical importance.

Recommendations

- The special and important landscape features of the Strangford Lough area should be recognised, maintained and enhanced.
- More detailed guidance on the scale and form of built development appropriate to each distinctive part of the Strangford Lough landscape should be prepared.
- Countryside Policy Areas should be identified, and it should be ensured that Area Plan policies take account of the need to conserve and reinforce local distinctiveness in landscape and settlement character throughout the Strangford Lough area.
- Specific opportunities should be identified for ways of reducing the impact of intrusive features within the landscape, and appropriate mechanisms for their implementation should be investigated.
- Mechanisms and initiatives for encouraging sensitive farming and land use practices which will conserve and restore characteristic landscape features should be promoted.
- A policy for enhancing the appearance of farm buildings throughout the AONB should be developed.
- Highway improvements should be designed so as to respect the special character of the area.
- Corridor studies should be carried out for the A20 between Newtownards and Portaferry and the A22 between Comber and Downpatrick.

Recreation and Access

Strangford Lough and the surrounding area are attractive for a range of recreational activities. These range from walking and cycling to sailing and sub-aqua diving. There is a general upward trend in recreational activity, and it is important that mechanisms are in place to guide future growth around Strangford Lough if conflicts of interest are to be avoided. The main issues relate to identifying the types and scale of different activities which can be accommodated without creating significant conflict with each other or other legitimate uses of the area (eg. conservation, farming etc). This includes a consideration of how access to the Lough and surrounding areas may best be developed and managed in ways which are sensitive to the needs of landowners and conservation interests.

Objective

To maximise the benefits from the use of the recreation resources of the Strangford Lough area through a strengthened partnership commitment to sustainable recreation based on promoting existing and new user activity, responsible access provision, and best practice management.

Recommendations

- Self-guided walking/cycling trails linked to local settlements should be developed.
- Local authorities should further develop access policies, strategies and initiatives to increase opportunities for sustainable public access routes around the Lough.
- Opportunities for managed public access to the Lough for water sports activities should be provided.
- The sailing potential of the Lough for visitors should be enhanced through the provision of further boat berthing and development of associated infrastructure eg. changing accommodation/showering blocks; toilet amenities, pump-out facilities etc.
- Support should be given in the short term to continued research into the feasibility of developing sea angling products in Strangford Lough.
- Specific activity “products” (eg. cycling, sailing, golf, riding, walking etc.) which can be sold to specific target market sectors either as packages or as themes with visitors compiling their own inventory should be co-ordinated and established.
- An integrated range of water and other sports coaching and training programmes centred on the Strangford Lough sailing clubs and their facilities should be developed.
- The introduction of voluntary codes of conduct for recreation activity, particularly those lacking a governing body or club, should be encouraged. Failing this formal regulations should be introduced by local authorities and supported by appropriate means of enforcement.

Tourism Development

There is potential for tourism to play a greater role in the local economy, and fairly small increases in numbers would represent significant percentage gains for local businesses. However, future development should be in character with the area, and links between natural assets and tourism revenue should be more tangible to avoid the perception that conservation interests are inhibiting economic development of the area.

Objective

To develop tourism activity, particularly the staying visitor market to its full potential consistent with maintaining the quality of the natural and built environment, and the quality of the tourism product itself.

Recommendations

- Tourism representation on the Strangford Lough Management Committee (SLMC) should be maintained and should include tourism business interests and also the statutory agency input of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB).
- Within the review of Area Plans tourism development needs should be taken into account; and tourism development parameters encouraged and promoted to local communities.
- The general tourism promotion of Strangford Lough should continue within the larger area marketing group organised by the local authorities and NITB, but in doing so the distinctive character of Strangford Lough should be clearly identified in the publicity material.
- Tourism industry representatives, including NITB, should meet with selected recreational clubs and conservation groups and organisations (including SLMC) to establish pilot projects on “Limits of Acceptable Change” which could be supported by management policies and initiatives.
- Local tourism businesses should, in the first instance, negotiate financial arrangements with existing recreational clubs and conservation groups to provide facilities for visitors which can then be included as part of the overnight accommodation package and promoted to special interest and activity markets. Should the interests controlling these facilities be unresponsive to such initiatives then the facility provision should be pursued on a community basis, with local authority support, to allow tourism businesses to generate economic benefit in the Strangford area.
- Appropriate agencies should convene to consider an overview of visitor flow around the Lough.
- Transport companies and local authorities should evaluate the market feasibility of introducing a “shuttle” bus service along both sides of the Lough and linking Newtownards, Downpatrick and the Portaferry-Strangford ferry.
- The feasibility of establishing a Strangford Lough environment centre should be investigated as a means of creating greater visitor awareness of the Lough environment and through this process introducing further management measures to the area.

Rural Economic Activity

Whilst agriculture and fishing are likely to remain important for communities around Strangford Lough, tourism represents one of the largest potential growth “industries” for the area. Future economic development relies upon the necessary infrastructure being in place, and this includes the protection of vulnerable coastal facilities such as roads and buildings. These activities are in part dependent upon the good environmental quality associated with Strangford Lough.

Objective

To encourage the development and maintenance of existing or new economic activities in a manner which is compatible with the natural and built heritage of Strangford Lough.

Recommendations

- The role of local farmers in maintaining the quality of the local environment (including the waters of Strangford Lough) should be promoted, and advice provided on environmentally sensitive farming techniques.
- Assistance should be provided to local farmers to enable them to diversify their businesses.

- Existing and new measures to promote the sustainable use of fish and shellfish stocks should be supported, and promoted as necessary.
- Existing aquaculture operations following best environmental practice should be maintained and acceptable opportunities for expansion should be explored and promoted.
- The likely need for future coastal defence works to protect new developments or infrastructure should be considered at the proposal stage. The design of coastal defence works for existing developments should consider all possible options in line with current best practice, including the opportunities for habitat creation.
- The potential to promote the development of small businesses in rural areas should be reviewed; where possible these should reflect and promote the environmental quality of the area.
- Opportunities to attract small-scale craft industries and business to the area should be reviewed by the District Councils.