

**SOUTH RENFREWSHIRE ACCESS
NETWORK INITIATIVE**

FEASIBILITY STUDY

By

Ross Anderson Consultancy

In association with

**DC Farquhar and Partners, Engineers
Bryan Byrne Consultants, Chartered Quantity Surveyors
Gillian Mc Vitie, Landscape Architect
Liz Parsons, Ecology, Education and Interpretation**

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Acknowledgement

The timescale for this project was short and at a busy time of year. However, we conducted over 70 interviews and consultations, and we would like to thank all those who set aside time to talk to us or respond to our enquiries.

SOUTH RENFREWSHIRE ACCESS NETWORK INITIATIVE (SRANI)

Executive Summary

Brief and Method of Working

- 1 The aim of the SRANI project is to “establish a network of non-motorised access routes linking routes, facilities and attractions around Castle Semple Loch, including upgrading the link from the railway station to Lochwinnoch Village”.
- 2 The timing of the feasibility study could hardly be better given that issues such as access to the countryside, healthy living, sustainable transport, education, conservation, tourism, social inclusion, rural deprivation, and partnerships have some priority on both central and local government agenda.
- 3 Throughout the study, the consultants met and reported to a managing “Core Group” at three-weekly intervals. Their input and information supplied was crucial to completing the study on time.

Background and Context

- 4 The study has taken place within an existing framework of Structure and Local Plans, as well as non-statutory ones. Examination of the Renfrewshire Local Plan – Finalised Version, the Plan suggests that the proposed footpath network supports a wide range of identified aims within the documents. The Renfrewshire LEC 3-Year Tourism Strategy identifies the importance of the day visitor market to Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park and Castle Semple, and suggests that there are significant opportunities for development that have yet to be fully realised. The Tourism Strategy “Action Plan” could have been written specifically for the SRANI project so closely does it fit the project’s objectives. The project also meets five out of six of the Strategic Aims of the Clyde Muirshiel Park Authority’s own 2003 to 2006 approved Strategy

Existing Situation

- 5 Examination of the existing situation shows that:-
 - The village of Lochwinnoch has a fascinating history dating back to the Stone Age.
 - Whilst the village still retains a variety of shops and services, these have been reducing in recent years.
 - Lochwinnoch retains a strong sense of community but qualification of the village for monies from the

Sustainable Communities Project demonstrates problems of rural deprivation, unemployment and social disadvantage.

- The existing footpath from the station to the village is inadequate, potentially dangerous, and does not encourage pedestrian or cyclist usage of the train. Crossing the A760 is hazardous, and there is a need for a safe crossing point in the area of the RSPB/station access.
- Both Castle Semple and Barr Lochs have been the subject of extensive drainage and engineering works since the late 1600s, and their story, linked to the families involved, has enormous potential for interpretation and visitor interest.
- Castle Semple Loch is used extensively for water-based activities, for viewing, bird watching, and educational activities. The Castle Semple Centre and the RSPB are extremely popular with day visitors. Building and car parking capacity is an issue on busy weekends throughout the year at both facilities.
- The Sustrans National Cycle Route No 7 passes through Lochwinnoch and parallels Castle Semple Loch to the north. It has recently been upgraded to a hard surface and its popularity is growing quickly. Combined with other footpaths, the cycle route provides opportunities for circular paths from both Lochwinnoch and Howwood. The cycle route also provides access to the countryside for a number of Social Inclusion Partnership Areas in Renfrewshire and Ayrshire.
- Listed buildings extend outwith the Lochwinnoch Conservation Area, and include a number of bridges, castle ruins, and built structures. The Collegiate Church near to Low Semple is an important monument and in the care of Historic Scotland, but access problems have prevented it from receiving the number of visitors its importance deserves.
- Castle Semple and Barr Lochs are SSSI, and valued for both bird, marshland vegetation, fringing woodland, and open water areas. SSSI status means that any development proposals that might impact upon the designated areas have to be considered carefully and may require the preparation of Environmental Impact Assessments.
- The railway station is disappointing as a potential major public transport access point. Access, waiting, car parking, and cycle storage facilities need upgrading. An improvement in service frequency would undoubtedly increase usage of the station.
- Visitor numbers at the Castle Semple Centre car park and at the RSPB have been increasing at an extremely

fast rate. The capacity of buildings and car parks to cater for visitors on busy weekends is stretched. Little is known, however, about the visitors and there is an urgent need for basic but regular visitor surveys to guide future development and management proposals.

- Interpretation facilities and activities exist at both the Castle Semple Centre and the RSPB. The RSPB, in particular, run environmental education programmes for schools and other groups.
- Renfrewshire Council owns land completely encircling Castle Semple Loch. The establishment of a path around the loch should not fail on land ownership issues.

Consultations

- 6 In the order of 70 consultations have been undertaken in the course of the study, and there is no doubting the extremely high level of support and enthusiasm for establishing a route around the loch including a safe route to the station. Whilst the consultees recognised the path would be expensive to build, it was also felt by many that the project met so many objectives and had so many benefits that finding capital monies would be possible.

Survey of Existing and Potential Footpath Routes

- 7 Survey of the existing and potential foot path routes confirmed that there are no land ownership, ecological, hydrological or engineering issues that are particularly difficult or unusual to overcome. The survey highlighted the desirability of creating a link between a lochside path and the cycle route in the area of Low Semple, and of taking a higher and drier route on the southern side of Castle Semple Loch, which would be on privately owned land. Survey, consultation and discussion identified four main user groups, namely:-

- walkers (including young families with prams)
- wheelchair users
- cyclists
- horse-riders

Footpath Use and Width

- 8 A preference was established for unsegregated joint cycle and pedestrian use of the footpath with a segregated track/bridleway for horses if land area and funding permitted. Reference to the Scottish Executive Publication “Cycle by Design” recommends a minimum path width of 2.0 metres and this has been adopted except in special circumstances such as access to the Peel Tower.

Opportunities

- 9 Examination of the opportunities for establishing a local footpath network lead onto the identification of related opportunities opened up by footpath development. They include, for example:-
- economic development at Castle Semple Centre, the RSPB, the village and area in general.
 - car parking and traffic management
 - cycling and sustainable transport
 - training
 - education and schools
 - listed buildings and structures preservation and enhancement
 - landscape restoration
 - interpretation of social and economic history & nature conservation
 - the utilisation of local talent and skills
 - the development of a marketing and promotion strategy for the Lochwinnoch/Castle Semple area aimed at the day trip and activity markets.

Proposals

- 10 The Proposals are embodied in an overall Master Plan which defines the line of the proposed round the loch footpath, the location of proposed bridges, and the type of surfacings proposed. It indicates the key locations for interpretation, sitting and picnic areas, viewing points, car parking and gateway signage. It also indicates linkages to existing and proposed paths and features of interest, which, with the loch side path, form a network of routes for walking, cycling, and horse-riding. Without doubt, there is a potential here to expand this network further to the north, east and west of the Lochwinnoch/Castle Semple area. The proposed route has been divided up into four sections, which reflect a similarity of construction and likely contractual packages. Funding could also be applied for on the basis of these sections.

The four sections include:-

- Lochwinnoch Station – the proposed public transport gateway to the area. The station should be well kept and look special with welcoming and informative signage. It should have enclosed waiting shelters, access ramps, secure cycle storage, increased parking and a safe junction with the A760.
- Station to Castle Semple Centre – on leaving the station visitors should be able to cross the A760 in safety, visit the RSPB and cycle or walk safely on a new tarmac surfaced path, parallel to

the A760 and Lochlip Road, to the village and Castle Semple Centre. There should be opportunities to learn about the adjacent marsh, picnic beside the River Calder, join the cycle route to go into Ayrshire or continue round to Castle Semple Centre. At Castle Semple, there should be opportunities to sit and relax, visit the tearoom, browse round a new craft shop, and other speciality outlets, hire boats or bicycles, and participate in ranger-led activities.

- Castle Semple Centre to Fancy Bridge – the loch side tarmac surfaced footpath will likely be shared with cyclists and the occasional horse-rider. At Blackditch Bay, there should be a sheltered grassy picnic area, and a wheelchair friendly access up to the cycle route and the Parkhill Woods entrance. A return to the village via the cycle route or a visit to the Collegiate Church via Parkhill Woods will be options to continuing round the loch. The hard surfaced path will pass the site of the old Castle Semple Mansion at Low Semple where there should be a further opportunity to join the cycle route and path to the Collegiate Church and Parkhill Wood. At a restored Fancy Bridge, visitors can continue around the loch by crossing the Black Cart Water and Risk Burn, or continue eastwards on either bank of the Black Cart Water to join the Howwood Road and proceed to Howwood village with its train station and bus services.
- Fancy Bridge to RSPB – the footpath surface is now gravel which is less formal and more suited to the character of the countryside at this point. The preferred route climbs up to the railway to provide picnic areas and viewpoints away from the ecologically sensitive shores of this end of the loch. Horse riders will not be encouraged to use this section of the path. The route drops down into the loch side woodlands and picks up old footpath lines established at the time of the Barr Loch drainage works. At Tod's Seat, there should be a picnic area and viewpoint across the water to Lochwinnoch. At this point there will be the opportunity to visit the Peel Tower, restored to its condition in the early 1900s. The main route will follow the line of the existing footpath, where bird watching and interpretation opportunities are excellent, to the RSPB with its well-stocked shop and bird watching events for adults and children, and hence back to the station.

- 11 The opportunities for a variety of linkages to the main path and cycle route are numerous. A priority is suggested in establishing a Parkhill Woods to Jonshills footpath, car park, viewpoint and activity area.
- 12 The proposals also contain recommendations for path construction, drainage, vegetation management, signs, site furniture, gates, fencing, landscape restoration, and improvements and interpretation.

Proposals - Interpretation

- 13 First class interpretation is considered extremely important to the success of the project. Provision of interpretative facilities should be an integral part of the footpath construction programme. A brief for consultants to prepare detailed interpretation proposals should be developed. The proposals should include for the wide range of resources and interest of the area defined in this study.

Proposals - Education

- 14 A successful education programme already exists at both the RSPB and Castle Semple Centre, but it should be expanded and more collaborative projects undertaken. The new path will provide access to new and interesting teaching areas, and the study has indicated the real potential for increasing the scope of topics taught, for example, Scottish family history, agricultural and industrial revolutions, de-industrialisation, transport infrastructure, water engineering, recreation and tourism development.

Proposals – Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas

- 15 Proposals are also made to improve access to the Collegiate Church from the cycle route, the adjacent footpath and the Howwood to Lochwinnoch road. The Peel Tower, at the very least, should be consolidated and it is proposed that it should be restored to its condition at the beginning of the 20th century. Lochwinnoch village and Conservation Area would benefit from a townscape study and a programme of improvement works to enhance the appearance of the village. There are also a number of listed and interesting structures in the area that would benefit from repair, restoration and protection.

Proposals – Car Parking

- 16 Additional car parking is required now at Castle Semple Centre, the RSPB, the station, and within the village. Proposals include for an increase in parking spaces in the order of 202 built up by an increase of 10 spaces at the station, 20 at the RSPB, 20 at the Annexe, 12 at Jonshill and Collegiate Church, and 140 at the Castle Semple Centre.
- 17 The additional car parking at the Castle Semple Centre is achieved by the removal of the railway embankment for the whole length of the site, and re-designing the whole of the external layout of this area. This proposal, not a new one, has significant benefits, including:-

- the recycling of embankment materials by using them in the footpath works. In this way, the project could qualify for Landfill Tax monies.
- the space created offers significant scope for increased parking, increased landscaped open space and development opportunities for more facilities e.g. craft shop, cycle shop, and a re-located RSPB.
- improved visibility and access to and from the village.
- removal of three bridge structures thereby reducing the maintenance burden for Sustrans.

Increased Usage

- 18 Implementing the proposals should lead to an increase in visitor numbers to Lochwinnoch and Castle Semple and should generate a wide range of economic and other benefits. It is estimated that within three years of implementing the proposals, the visitor numbers on the cycle route will double to 130,000 per annum, that visitor numbers to the Castle Semple Centre will double and rise to 140,000 per annum, which could raise the shop and catering turnover to £300, 000 per annum. It is estimated that annual visits to the car park could rise to 500, 000 per annum. Clearly, numbers of this magnitude could lead to new business and employment opportunities at Castle Semple Centre and in Lochwinnoch village.
- 19 Visitor numbers to the RSPB are also forecast to continue rising and to reach 72,000 per annum within three years of project implementation. This increase will also be reflected in the shop turnover which will generate a need for more permanent staff and volunteers.
- 20 Lochwinnoch Station – “A Gateway to Lochwinnoch”, is also forecast to increase its passenger numbers through a combination of increased use by commuters and visitors. It is proposed that enhanced and innovative marketing of the attractions of Lochwinnoch/Howwood and using the train to get there be undertaken by S.P.T.

Benefits of Increased Usage

- 21 The significantly increased visitor numbers should provide a positive boost to turnover for all village shops, carry outs, cafes, restaurants and pubs. Good food and eating out is an essential element of many days out, and it is proposed that those businesses should maintain and improve their high standards of service and cooperate closely with the Core Group, the RSPB, and CMRP in staff training and promoting the area.

22 Other benefits of the proposals are listed below:-

The project will

- implement tourism, environmental and sustainability policies in both Structure and Local Plans.
- implement elements of the Renfrewshire Council Transport and Cycling Strategies
- add value to recent Sustrans/Scottish Executive investment in cycle track route.
- form an important part of the required Renfrewshire Core Footpath Network.
- provide access for the disabled.
- provide access and activities for those often excluded from this type of facility. A number of Johnstone, Paisley and Ayrshire SIPS are convenient to the cycle track.
- provide village entry and project gateway signage that will enhance the profile and image of Lochwinnoch.
- encourage environmental improvements within the village.
- provide educational facilities and interpretation to help us understand our own history and environment.
- provide enhanced opportunities for healthy exercise, walking and cycling.
- provide enhanced recreational opportunities and variety through walks of differing lengths, surfaces and gradients.
- provide enhanced opportunities for significant community involvement.
- provide enhanced opportunities to use and encourage local talent.
- provide enhanced opportunity for the Core Group to encourage cooperation of a wide range of interests in implementing and marketing the proposals.
- provide enhanced opportunities for extended CMRP and RSPB activities and educational programmes.
- provide enhanced opportunities for a greater "Events" and activities programme.
- provide for resolution of access issues to the Collegiate Church
- provide for the Peel Tower to be consolidated and restored.
- provide for listed buildings and structures to be repaired and restored.
- provide for the improvement of Lochlip Road and Church Street/Winnoc Road junctions.
- provide a "destination product" for the area and establish Lochwinnoch as an important day trip destination.
- provide for the removal of the old embankment at Castle Semple Centre which has numerous benefits, i.e.
 - recycled material to form path through marsh
 - allows doubling of parking area
 - allows creation of larger grass area for picnics and activities
 - removes visual barrier and restores linkage of village to loch
 - opens village to visitors
 - reduces "isolation" of Castle Semple Centre and Loch to village.

Estimated Costs

- 23 Estimated costs for providing the basic footpath from the station round the loch to the RSPB is in the order of £1.9m. Add the proposed improvements to the station and the costs rise to £2m or so. Adding the cost of the works to the Castle Semple Centre, providing for interpretation, special area developments at Blackditch Bay and Tod's Seat, and allowing for professional fees, raises the total project costs to £4,198,530.00
- 24 There is an option to establish the walk around the loch by simply bridging the Black Cart Water and Risk Burn without any associated footpath works. Including professional fees, it is estimated that these bridges could be put in place for a sum in the order of £40,000.
- 25 Cost estimates for maintaining the proposed works amount to some £100,000 per annum over a ten-year period. A reduction in the frequency and standard of maintenance works would lead to a significant reduction in these costings. Costs would, of course, be offset by income from the increased number of visitors to the area.

Environmental Impacts

- 26 A large proportion of the path will be following the route of an existing path network and should, therefore, have limited environmental effects. Meetings with Renfrewshire Council and SNH have confirmed that an Environmental Impact Assessment will not be required to obtain planning permission for the proposals provided the additional survey work, identified by SNH, is undertaken. It is proposed that these surveys be undertaken as soon as possible. A cost of some £15,000 has been estimated for these surveys.

Funding Sources

- 27 The report identifies a wide range of possible funding sources. No approaches to these possible sources have been made and there is a significant input required to investigate them, and match projects to possible funders. No one organisation will fund the project but without doubt the study demonstrates that it satisfies a wide range of government objectives and programmes. Funding and implementation will, therefore, depend on the skill and time resources of the lead organisation in successfully putting together a variety of funding sources to achieve implementation of discrete or whole project work packages.

Priorities

- 28 Physical projects have been listed in order of priority, as follows:-
- 1a) Bridging of Black Cart Water and Risk Burn
 - b) Provision of Toucan crossing on the A760 close to the RSPB and station access.
 - 2) Provision of new footpath link between the station and Castle Semple Centre.
 - 3) Station improvements.
 - 4) Constructing footpath link from Castle Semple Centre to the Fancy Bridge including a link to the cycle route at Low Semple.
 - 5) Constructing footpath link on the south side from Fancy Bridge to RSPB.
 - 6) Removal of railway embankment and new external layout at Castle Semple Centre.
 - 7) Additional parking at the Annexe and improvements to Lochlip Road from Calder Bridge to Castle Semple Centre.
 - 8) Other projects e.g. Peel Tower, Jonshill footpath and car park, other footpath links, repairing loch edges etc.

Next Steps and Action Programme

29 Assuming acceptance and approval of this report, a preliminary listing of recommended tasks and actions is proposed for the eighteen months following. Much will depend on whether sufficient resources have been allocated to leading the project, the commitment of the Core Group, the duration of the planning process, and the ease and timing of the fundraising.

30 Months 1 to 6 Tasks/Activities

- Report accepted by CMRPA, SNH and the three contributing Councils, and any other organisations required to support this project.
- Decision as to who in what organisation will lead the project and the actual project “leader” or manager.
- Allocation of sufficient resources to allow the “leader” to pursue the project with consistent vigour. Adequate “core funding must be secured”
- Confirmation of Renfrewshire Council’s willingness to Project Manage the initiative.
- Seek approval for bridge over Black Cart Water and secure funding.

- Consultations with landowners and other organisations who may have an interest and/or a role to play in the project.
- Appoint consultants to implement Black Cart Water bridge installation.
- Begin contact with potential funders and allocate projects to potential funders.
- Register the Castle Semple embankment removal as a project with ENTRUST after detailed consultation with Sustrans.
- Install car and people counters at RSPB and Castle Semple Centre.
- Establish Core Group as “Project Steering Group” and have regular progress meetings.
- Prepare consultant briefs for studies required by SNH in lieu of EIA and put out to tender after securing funding.
- Encourage continuation of 3 Lochs Study and Initiative.

31 Months 6 to 12 Tasks/Activities

- Establish content and timing of a planning application
- Encourage enhanced marketing and promotion of events and pursuit of other opportunities as the project gets underway. The local communities of interest should be kept informed.
- Pursue and put together a detailed funding and action programme.
- Prepare consultant briefs for studies to cover the following:-
 - historical, social and economic research of the area.
 - Lochwinnoch townscape study.
 - Peel Tower consolidation and restoration.
 - detailed interpretation proposals.
 - removal of embankment and redesign of site layout at Castle Semple Centre.
 - site investigations of embankment materials.
 - detailed design for Lochwinnoch Station.
 - detailed design for station to Castle Semple Centre footpath.
- Design and construct village “gateway” features.
- initiatives that contribute to the project e.g. sculpture, poetry and events.
- Authorise construction of bridge over Black Cart Water and Risk Burn.
- Liaise closely with Sustrans re railway embankment and prepare legal agreement allowing use of their land.
- Liaise closely with Railtrack re works to the station.

- Commission as many of the required studies as funding will allow.
- Pursue funding organisations and submit applications wherever possible.
- Establish a group or working party to plan and coordinate the future development of education in the Castle Semple/Lochwinnoch area.
- Consider establishing a use-zoning plan for the loch water area.
- Prepare planning application for footpath and recommended links.
- Develop and agree a marketing strategy for Lochwinnoch/Castle Semple area.
- Confirm and agree with landowners' proposals for footpaths and ongoing management where they cross or are routed over privately owned ground.
- Continue regular Core Group meetings and encourage community involvement.
- Keep under constant review the detailed funding and action programme.

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