HELPING THE HILLS

# UPAG Site Visit Report Sept 2026



## Preamble:-

UPAG, the Upland Path Advisory Group, is a loosely affiliated group or network of path managers, contractors, hill user groups, and other interested parties that are involved in constructing, repairing and maintaining upland paths. Started in Scotland and funded by the the Scottish Government, but now includes participation from Scotland, England, Ireland, N Ireland, and Wales. There goals are similar to Helping the Hills and they have a site visit most years to different and varied sites, to primarily network, but also to learn from what works and what doesn't work, for particular situations.

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| **Project** | Eryri NP, North Wales |
| **Meeting Type** | UPAG Annual Site Visit |
| **Date** | 21st and 22nd September 2026 |
| **Time** | 9am to 5pm approx. (both days) |
| **Location** | Day One - Cwm Idwal, Ogwen Valley<br>Day Two- Pyg Track / Miners' Track, Yr Wyddfa |
| **Report Prepared By** | Matt McConway, Mountaineering Ireland |

## 1. Attendees

| Name | Role | Organisation | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Matt McConway | Observer / Advisor | Mountaineering Ireland | Ireland |
| Jack Peyton (plus 3 from National Park) | Organiser/ Senior Warden | Eryri NP | Wales |
| Hywel Jones | Project Officer | Eryri NP | Wales |
| Nan Morris | Footpath Team | National Trust for Scotland | Scotland |
| Ryan Hamilton (plus 1 – Bradley) | Contactor | Hamiltons Ltd | Scotland |
| Annie Duckworth (plus 2) | Manager | Fix the Fells/ LDNPA | England |
| Linus Voksepp | Footpath Ranger | (Murlough) NTtust | N. Ireland |
| Liam Prior | Footpath Operative | Terra Firma Enviornmental Ltd | England |
| Vince Mc Alinden | Project Manager | Cassywateroutdoors/ Mountaireering Ireland | Ireland |
| Aaron Byrne | Project Manager | Wicklow Partnership | Ireland |
| Chris Macblain | Project Manager | Mournes Heritage Trust | N.Ireland |
| Philip Savage | Footpath Team Leader | Mournes Heritage Trust | N.Ireland |
| Dan Goodwin (plus 3 from NT) | Area Ranger, Snowdonia Footpath Team | National Trust, Wales | Wales |
| Fiona Cunningham (plus 1) | UPAG Coordinator | Nature Scotland | Scotland |
| Andy (tbc) | Contractor | Self Employed | Wales |
| Total Participants :- 24 | | | |

## 2. Day One – Cwm Idwal

The Cwm Idwal path is a circular , rough, mountain, path of about 5km. As a nature reserve,(Wales' first NNR) it holds rare arctic plants like purple saxifrage, moss campion, and snowdon lily; has a protected lake in Llyn Idwal, has impressive geology and history, including being visited by Darwin and Edmund Hillary (not at the same time!). As an NNR, there was early use of exclusion plots from the 1970s

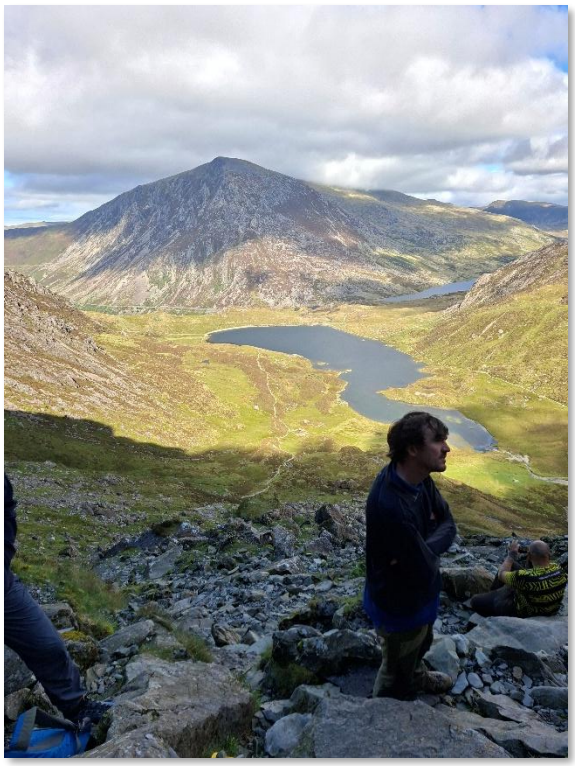


As we walked round the site we witnessed mostly built features of block stone including stone pitching and steps, and also large sections of stepping stones – large, flat stones, that had been basically floated on top of peaty area, but due to their size were remarkably stable. It was obvious from the start that a lot of money had been spent over the years on the path, especially the importation of block stone by helicopter, as no stone in the vicinity

was allowed to be used because of the rare and protected plants and geology.

From early on in the visit it was obvious that the long term strategy was to use building stone construction ie stepping stones, stone pitching, steps etc rather than aggregate paths. The reasoning was for lower maintenance costs and a hard wearing surface. And this did seem to be paying off for them as there was little signs of 'off path' erosion, despite in many cases having extremely high and awkward 'risers' that in other sites in Ireland and Scotland, would have deterred people from using the path over time. The suggestions for the success was conjectured as a more compliant or aware hill user, faster vegetation growth, and more robust terrain. However, this strategy was acknowledged that it only worked with the capital funding to fly in material, consistently over the years.

The path was reckoned to have about 130k users a year, and the interventions seemed to be working.



Other features on the path included a bridge constructed from a one piece rock of 5metres in length (weight over the limit of a normal helicopter flight- 4000kg so was flown in by an army Chinook helicopter.) This bridge was not only used for access but to keep people from venturing upstream to cross a stream, were rare alpine plants were located.

When we walked past the long stepping stone section, we were informed that this area was eroded to 30m wide before the stepping stones had went in and from our knowledge, this erosion has recovered to about 85% cover, a good result.

At the apex of our site visit, there was a steep section with work still to be done and Jack was asking for suggestions as to how to go ahead with regards to Health and Safety – it was a reasonably dangerous work site and added precautions would have to be taken, esp to lower the risks of stones falling from the site.

This brainstorming was as much to confirm and validate the courses of actions available, most of which had been thought of by the National Park and National trust team, including the use of fencing, banksmans, gabions, and safe systems of work.

## 3. Day Two – Pyg Track/ Miner Track Loop, Yr Wyddfa

Yr Wyddfa or Snowden, is probably the busiest path in the British Isles with an estimate of over 500k visitors a year, with several routes getting to the summit. We did not go to the summit for this site visit ( about 1km shy) but used the Pyg Track and Miners Track, as a loop, in order to see the different path construction interventions over time, approx. 10 km - of which 4 to 5km was on bound aggregate tracks, corresponding to the historic mine tracks.

Copper mining was mined here, with remnants of mill and miners accommodation still present. The causeway that is built across the Llyn Llydaw was built in 1853.

Most of the Pyg path is a rough, rocky, heavily built path with small changes in technique over the years, but generally using large stones for a walking surface. Where any aggregate path remains (apart from the bound tracks at the start of both tracks close to the warden centre and carpark,) there is an understanding that it will be replaced by stonework , when and if the funding becomes available for the importation of materials. As we walked through the sections there was historical remnants of plastic drainage pipes and concrete culverts and drainage breaks.



There was more erosion showing on these paths compared to the previous days, but still quite contained considering the numbers of hill users.

The majority of the erosion was at the junction of the two tracks with shortcutting happening along a large length. Going back down the miners track at this point was quite rough in places, that did 'disperse' people in certain places, due to a lack of definition.

Maintenance of all paths could be said to be good and reasonably well resourced but there is always a want for more resources to do repairs.

## 4. Points raised over the two days.

The following points were raised and discussed over the two days:-

**Materials:-**

**Block stone** was the main material used for construction on the sites, and latterly all is imported from quarries. This opened up a chain of thought on historical restoration – should stone match the stone already there, to blend in or should it be deliberately different so that it can be seen at a glance what has been newly imported. This is the current school of thought in restoration of historic buildings. But would it translate to Upland Path repairs? There was also talk of the transportation of stone by helicopter, the different ways to do it ie the NP here has drilled into large stones and inserted cams or fixings, and flew large stones this way.
There was also interests in the costs associated with buying stone, with a figure of about 75£ a tonne being paid for stone in North Wales.

**Plastics:** There was a consensus that plastic should not be used in open, wild, upland areas, including terram, geogrid, or recycled plastic boardwalk. Where a boardwalk maybe acceptable ie in a woodland or lower level trail or historic boardwalk,- after discussing the durability, over flexibility, and chemical inputs- most people there were favouring not using the recycled plastic at all, but trying to get the best wood they could, going forward. Also, not using geotextiles at all, but using wool or other natural materials as an underlay when floating a path over a wet area.

**Funding and Framing:-**

There was much discussion over funding with a basic frustration that every organisation faces, with a continuation of the 'feast and famine' sources, that have plagued upland pathwork for over 4 decades, and the lack of revenue streams for carrying out ongoing essential path maintenance. Jack was using his own example of two path, similar footfall, similar lengths, but different erosion levels, in what Jack states was lack of funding in maintenance for the more damaged one.

Another consensus was that the amount of people walking in the hills has seemed to have exploded since the pandemic, with the Monday site, Cwm Idwal, seeing an increase of 70k people 10 years ago to 130k at the last figures.
As part of the funding discussion Aaron from Wicklow was saying how -for funding purposes- some paths are counted as 'access' while Annie from Fix the Fells says they are strictly 'conservation' based.

**Techniques and the wider picture:**

We heard some of the techniques that were employed by the footpath teams here including drilling stones for transport, use of gabions for support structures ; the use of landscaping to block desire lines; and the use of stepping stones over wet areas to naturally drain without upsetting the hydrology.

We also heard from Phil Savage from the Mournes Heritage Trust who regularly uses LIDAR in his surveying. This is an app that is compatible with an Ipad, and gives a '3D' representation of the terrain, extremely useful in showing to clients what, and why, work is to be done etc.

There was also shared knowledge or networking about CDM regulation, with interpretation and proportionality coming to the fore.



MMcC 28th September 2026