

A new future for Edinburgh's premier park?

Holyrood Park is widely seen as 'an iconic green space' in the heart of the city and 'Edinburgh's premier park'.

Through the path-breaking work of James Hutton, the park also has great significance in the history of geology. It is, many would agree, 'a city park like no other'. [Historic Environment Scotland](#) (HES) is currently carrying out a 12-week public consultation on the future of the park. On Saturday they held a public drop-in exhibition in Holyrood Park Education Centre, allowing visitors to examine the plans and have their queries and concerns answered. Historic Environment Scotland are keen to find out about 'where, when and how' people use the park. Any changes to it will need the support of the people of Edinburgh and other stakeholders.

The 'Outline Strategic Plan' of 'a new future' for the park focuses on ensuring that Holyrood Park remains accessible and well used by locals and tourists. To ensure this, Historic Environment Scotland argues that patterns of usage will need to evolve; otherwise the park will slowly degrade. This would be a great pity given the way that the park offers easy access to nature and the way that being in and exercising in such an environment promotes general well being and good mental health.

The benefits of a walk in such an environment and drinking in the stunning views are hard to understate. Overall, the aim is to 'strengthen' the park's status and 'provide further

wellbeing benefits’.



Photo by [Mike Newbry](#) on [Unsplash](#)

A main focus of the project is to diversify the routes taken up and around Arthur's Seat. There are about a dozen ways up, though only a handful are promoted or widely used. At present, the vast majority head up via two routes, with the route up from near Holyrood Palace (the so-called Red Route) by far the most common. It's what is generally recommended as the easiest route up, even if it's a bit of a boring trudge compared to the other, twistier but steeper routes up. There you will see large groups (for example bunches of English language students) snaking up. Such concentrations on particular routes are causing issues with erosion. In addition, increased rainfall often turns these routes into little streams, which again eats away at the topsoil. In a short period a path can turn into a significant scar on the side of the hill.

The hope is by diversifying the number of recommended routes, the park authorities will be able to close certain paths for a period of time to allow them to recover. At present one of the

routes is undergoing substantial repair work. The hope is that a more diversified route pattern will ensure that such 'emergency' repairs can be avoided. The issues of erosion and resultant rock falls also affect one of the famous routes: the so-called Radical Road. This has been closed to the public for over five years. Groups such as Ramblers Scotland believe that too rigid a line has been taken in relation to the Radical Road. The protests over this famous path are indicative of the strong feelings provoked by aspects of Holyrood Park and public access to it.

These are the ways that it's hoped the park can mitigate the worst effects of increased visitor numbers and the challenges posed by climate change. Maintaining the status quo will only lead to steady decline and the waning of a fantastic public asset. Underpinning the vision is the idea that "If you want things to stay the same, things are going to have to change" (Giuseppi Tomasi di Lampedusa).

Holyrood Park could be seen as a concentrated microcosm of how Edinburgh more generally is dealing with vastly increased visitor numbers. How can this be done without damaging what draws people to the city. In short, [widely expressed concerns](#) about 'over-tourism' facing many historic cities (Venice, Rome etc) Again, diversification may involve promoting a wider range of attractions than the very narrow range that tends to be promoted (e.g. not just the Old Town, and the first two streets of the New Town, Dean Village etc).



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One factor mitigating against a diversification of routes is that many locals cherish some of the less publicised parts of Holyrood Park – for being relatively quiet and ‘unspoilt’. Whinney Hill, which sits alongside the main peak, is a favourite place of many locals, who prize the fact that they can escape from the hordes of tourists there. They may be a little bit reluctant for the hidden routes up the hill to be signposted and made more obvious. This is one of the tensions that Historic Environment Scotland face as they attempt to ensure that future proposals ‘reflect the needs of all park users’.

The most controversial recommendation is that Holyrood Park become largely car-free. Historic Environment Scotland accepts that there will need to be some compromise, especially in order to maintain disabled access to the park. Disabled access has been a subject brought up by many of those who oppose a

car-free future for the park.

Some see the notion of 'active travel' as part of a [wider 'anti-car' agenda](#) promoted by Historic Environment Scotland, Edinburgh City Council and other public bodies. This all adds to a degree of rancour to such debates. Historic Environment Scotland is keen to lower the temperature. One compromise might be the provision of buses to take visitors to less accessible parts. These buses could also help people access some of the alternative routes up Arthur Seat, some of which don't start at the foot of the hill; such as the underused Green route up from Dunsapie Loch (the start of that route can currently be reached by driving up Queen's Drive).

The consultation will close on Tuesday 19 December 2023. Historic Environment Scotland are looking for as many responses as possible. More information and the online consultation form can be found [here](#).



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