



# **Orienteering Ireland**

## **Policy**

**on**

## **Access to the Countryside**

# 1 Introduction

The purpose of this document is to outline the Orienteering Ireland's policy with regard to access to land for the sport of orienteering and that it be submitted to the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications working group on the National Countryside Recreation Strategy. We would like to thank the Department of the Environment and the working group, in particular, for the opportunity to make this submission.

A detailed description of the sport of orienteering is provided in Appendix I. Orienteering Ireland (OI) is the association set up to coordinate the sport and policies in the 26 counties in Ireland. Members are elected on an annual basis at the AGM.

OI takes responsibility for agreeing policy, interfacing with Sport Ireland, seeking grant aid, coordinating national competitions, promoting the sport, providing access to international competitions, managing insurance cover and ensuring that the safety of competitors and other users of the areas remains paramount.

As events are normally held in forests and/or open countryside, OI has a keen interest in ensuring that organisers and participants behave responsibly towards the environment and the landowner. The mapped land is a primary resource required for the sport. The organisation is dependent on the goodwill of the landowner for permission to use the land. Without access to the land, there would be no competitions. To ensure that the goodwill is maintained, every effort is made to understand any specific requirements or concerns that a landowners might have regarding the use of the land, e.g. if part of the area needs to be deemed out of bounds or if there are any specific seasonal restrictions.

The purpose of this document is to outline OI's policies on:

- The Environment
- Mapping
- Event Management
- Development
- Land Access
- Mountain Bike Orienteering specific issues

The main recommendations are:

- The forests and open mountainside continue to be made available to orienteering clubs for mapping and competitions
- There should be no fee for access to lands. Orienteering is organised on a voluntary basis for no profit. All monies generated by the sport are used directly and wholly for the further promotion and organisation of the sport.
- Local Authorities, Office of Public Works, Coillte and any other relevant state bodies continue to maintain and make the land available to the public for sports including orienteering
- There is a consultation process in place to optimise the investment in mapping, i.e. clubs are aware of any significant felling plans before mapping commences
- Clubs obtain any prerequisite permissions from landowners or stakeholders (within reason) before mapping or organising competitions
- Permission to map or hold an event will not be unreasonably withheld
- Events will be planned to minimise the impact on the environment and overuse of any area
- Consideration should be given to providing wheelchair access to areas which could be used for trail orienteering
- Maps will be made available on a commercial basis to local interests if required
- A safety code be strictly enforced at all competitions
- Transport and traffic are managed carefully to minimise the impact and the inconvenience to landowners and other users of the land
- Ensure that all litter is removed

## 2 Orienteering as a Countryside Stakeholder

There are currently 500 active orienteers in the Republic of Ireland with the same number again of recreational orienteers. Most orienteers are members of clubs. There are 17 registered clubs in the country. Orienteers include persons of all ages with many participating principally to stay fit and healthy, have fun and enjoy the mental challenge at the same time.

There are over 100 orienteering maps encompassing different areas all over the 26 counties. In order for an area to be considered for mapping, it needs to be runnable, possess a variety of features which can be used for control points, cover an area of at least 1 km<sup>2</sup> but preferably much larger. The terrain used varies from flat parkland to mountain side with or without forest. In many of the mountainous maps, the area covered would extend to 20km<sup>2</sup>. In these cases, the area would often be divided into a number of sub-areas resulting in 3 or 4 maps.

The orienteering season in Ireland starts in October and finishes in May. A number of supplementary fun events are held in the Summer. On average, there are approximately 150 events per year arranged on a regional basis. This includes 1 national, 1 international and 4/5 provincial events. There is also an active association in Northern Ireland Orienteering Association (NIOA), which is affiliated to British Orienteering. In the summer period, many of the elite and keen orienteers travel to competitions abroad including World Cup and World Championship events.

As mentioned in the introduction, the forest and open countryside are an essential resource for the sport of orienteering. Preservation of and access to the countryside are prerequisite to ensuring that the sport continues to be enjoyed by all. For this reason, the utmost care and consideration is given to

- Deciding on events, for local, regional and national fixture lists
- Planning and organising events to minimise the impact on the environment, further details in the section on the environment
- Consultation with local stakeholders
- Considering specific local requirements and issues
- Transport and traffic management
- Waste management

When deciding on events, priority is given to national and provincial championships. The national championships rotate by province annually and are held on a fixed date. Provincial championships are held in the respective provinces, normally on fixed dates. Within the various regions, the Greater Dublin region, Waterford/Wexford, Cork, Kerry and Connaught, regional events are held in the Autumn, Spring with a few in the Summer. The busiest months for orienteering events in Ireland are normally October, November, February, March and April, which are not peak traffic times in the countryside. All efforts are made to rotate the venues to prevent overuse of maps, consequently there is often an interlude of a number of years between competitions in many areas.

The national championships and international events usually attract the largest numbers, up to 300 competitors and occasionally more. Competitors are normally grouped into various start time bands usually between 11 am and 1 pm so that competitors arrive and depart at intervals. For any larger event, a group of people is given responsibility for managing traffic and parking, this is to ensure that local traffic is inconvenienced as little as possible and to ensure that other visitors to the area can gain access readily.

Where there are local landowners whose land bounds on an area where there are likely to be significant numbers, all efforts are made to ensure that any specific requirements or concerns that they have, are dealt with. Similarly, permission is sought from local landowners, including Coillte and other state bodies, before accessing their lands.

Transport, traffic and waste management are dealt with in section 6.

### **3 Environmental Policy**

Orienteering Ireland and its associated members are committed to minimising local and environmental issues arising from their use of terrain for orienteering purposes. OI recognises that it has a duty to act responsibly to ensure that orienteering events do not have an adverse effect on the terrain in which they are held. OI expects each of its clubs and event organisers to acknowledge the individual nature of each area to be used.

Competitor numbers in Ireland are generally low with typically 100 participants competing per event. Some of the larger national events can attract larger numbers in excess of 300 participants. Competitors at events are divided onto different courses and are started at time intervals, so the footfall from an orienteering event is not really discernible on any area being used. Therefore, events in Ireland have a negligible effect on the countryside. Orienteering in European countries has, however, proven that events with competitor numbers in excess of 10,000 can be organised and executed with minimal impact on the local environment.

OI recognises that consultation with local parties and landowners can serve to inform the event organisers of any environmental issues associated with a particular area. Without reliable access to areas there is no future for the sport. OI encourages all its members to promote relations with landowners and interest groups associated with orienteering areas to minimise the impacts of all orienteering events on the environment.

In the past event organisers have, after consultation, altered the dates of events to avoid use of orienteering areas during sensitive times such as nesting seasons. Orienteering courses can be routed around isolated sensitive areas to eliminate the risk of any damage to the local environment and ecology.

Event organisers can plan their courses to minimise the effects on local flora, fauna, wildlife, farmland, archaeological sites and already sensitive areas. Event planners can use control sites that keep competitors away from these areas. Where this is not practical sensitive areas can be ruled out of bounds. These boundaries are marked clearly on competitors' maps. Competitors who fail to observe these boundaries will be disqualified. Event organisers can also specify compulsory crossing points of walls and fences to minimise the adverse effect of competitors traversing these obstacles. Maps can also be altered to remove the sensitive area from the map to ensure that runners do not stray into sensitive areas.

### **4 Recreational Development**

OI supports appropriate and sustainable rural development, and orienteering events should in themselves promote appropriate recreational use of the countryside. OI appreciates that they have a great contribution to make to the development of the countryside for recreational purposes.

Orienteering itself offers the public an opportunity to explore the local countryside. Orienteering events allow for participation at all levels and ages from beginners right through to elite international athletes. The skills learned while orienteering promotes the safe and responsible use of the countryside, which can be adapted to other recreational activities such as mountain walking.

The forests and open countryside are one of the great amenities made freely available to the public. Coillte in particular manages a considerable amount of land on behalf of the state. It is imperative that this land remains available for public use, in particular recreational use and that it is not sold to developers to capitalise on the current demand for development land, reducing the amenities available to local communities. This should remain an imperative particularly if this body or any subsequent body is privatised.

OI and its associated members rely heavily on a natural landscape with minimal impacts from human developments. Orienteering events are held on a variety of different landscapes, some of which, such as open mountain terrain, is unique to Ireland and unrivalled by terrain in Europe. This is a major selling point for attracting foreign participants to our shores. OI would only like to see developments that do not endanger Ireland's unique landscape.

OI is supportive of efforts to develop amenities such as car parking facilities, toilet facilities, play areas, waymarked trails, etc, which promote the use of the local landscape and terrain in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way. Developments such as these would serve to enhance the enjoyment of local orienteering events, providing safe parking areas and a focal point for families and friends to gather afterwards.

OI supports the creation of economic benefits for local communities. Event organisers are encouraged to promote patronage of local facilities and attractions. Orienteering events also bring competitors to remote areas where local amenities can benefit from an influx of tourists. Orienteering events can bring significant economic benefits to local amenities such as café's, garages, restaurants, museums etc.

Clubs and members are also encouraged to establish or initiate the creation of permanent courses, which promote visitors separate to organised events. These amenities serve to attract visiting groups at various times during the year. Events can also serve to promote local attractions to members of the public who travel to compete. This can result in return visits to the area when events are not being held.

OI would welcome the opportunity to participate in the creation of any management policies for planned development in areas which impact orienteering. The members of OI have a diverse background in the public and private sector and can bring an added dimension to discussions on any development discussions. OI encourages its members to get involved in local development planning.

OI is also keen to promote the safe use of the countryside for all. OI has a strong safety record with no claims made on its insurance policy since its establishment. OI expects its affiliated clubs to have an adequate safety plan in place for each event. OI encourages other organisations to adopt similar plans to ensure that the countryside is a safe and enjoyable place for all stakeholders.

## **5 Mapping Policy**

At the heart of orienteering are maps. Highly detailed orienteering maps (generally at scales of 1:10,000 and 1:15,000) are researched, funded, surveyed, drawn and published within local orienteering clubs and with Orienteering Ireland support. These are the lifeblood of orienteering – good quality and up-to-date maps are essential to keep the quality of the sport high in Ireland and to attract new athletes and recreational orienteers. Outside of orienteering, these maps are often the most detailed survey of the area and can have a significant historic and community value.

Clubs can invest up to EUR 10,000 for international standard orienteering maps (along with many hours of voluntary time) and it is of course desirable that this investment is safeguarded in the medium to long term. To ensure that any new map is a worthwhile investment, clubs planning new maps consult with Coillte and other landowners before mapping commences and work together to look at plans for the area in the future. It can then be judged whether the area has a long-term value for orienteering, and also whether a new map will be valid for a sufficiently long period to justify the mapping costs. Consultations with local communities are also a valuable investment in good continuing relations between orienteering and the areas visited by the sport.

Permission to map an area is obtained in advance from all landowners whose properties will be included on the proposed map. If an area cannot be mapped, it is excluded from the map, or (by agreement) included but marked permanently out of bounds. Landowners are reassured that all necessary permission to hold events are obtained, but in agreeing to the mapping there should be an understanding that future use of the area will not be unreasonably declined.

Orienteering mapmakers also ensure that they have all necessary permissions to make use of any existing maps in their survey.

In the interests of quality orienteering, OI supports the development of orienteering maps of diverse areas including forestry, open mountainside and parklands. OI recognises the need to protect sensitive areas. This is fully discussed in the Environmental Policy above.

Where appropriate, maps can be made available (at a reasonable cost) to local shops, schools, visitor centres, historians, etc to provide a resource for other users. Maps have also been displayed on local development, tourist and forestry information notice boards where available, again adding to the amenity value of the area.

In all the above cases, the map copyrights of the clubs should be protected.

## **6 Land Access**

OI supports the principle of free and reasonable access to the countryside for recreational users while respecting appropriate rights for landowners.

All necessary licences and permissions from landowners are obtained by event organisers well in advance of planned events. This is a condition of registering an event with OI. Orienteers at all times respect private property rights and event maps clearly highlight any mapped areas to which access has not been obtained as 'out of bounds'. Orienteering supports non-interference with crops – areas are marked 'out of bounds'. Courses at events with 'out of bounds' areas are planned to avoid any such area. Event organisers disqualify competitors who do not respect 'out of bounds' areas.

Event organisers are expected to ensure traffic and parking management is sufficient not to inconvenience others. Car sharing is promoted where space is limited for parking. Shuttle transport to and from a more suitable parking location is implanted when deemed necessary.

Whilst orienteers have no track record of creating litter problems, all event organisers still ensure appropriate litter management is undertaken and check that no litter caused by an event remains in the area after the event. This includes control tags in the forest, traffic signage and competitor refuse.

## **7 Mountain Bike Orienteering (MTBO)**

MTBO is a relatively new variant of orienteering with a low number of competitors so far in Ireland – max 40 to date. Internationally, it is a rapidly growing sport. All of the above environmental, development and land access policies also apply to MTBO.

Organisers ensure that landowners being approached for permission are aware that the event is mountain bike orienteering.

MTBO organisers make use of (and map) existing paths only and not engage in the 'manufacture' of new MTB trails. Areas prone to undue damage by bikes are avoided and also marked as disallowed trails, particularly in areas with high usage by other users.

Organisers state that riders are restricted to only using mapped paths if appropriate or carrying bikes when off paths. However, there may be areas where unlimited access is not likely to cause any problems and in these areas restrictions should not be required. These options are discussed with those giving permission to use the land.

Organisers erect warning signs on boundary entrances and take extra precautions if events are held in areas with significant other user traffic such as pedestrians and horses.

OI is willing to support an MTB code of conduct, which supports reasonable rights of access for cyclists to the countryside. OI promotes the availability of suitable paths and trails for use for MTBO. It is accepted that some paths are not suitable, and these should be avoided by course planners and marked as disallowed paths on maps.

Officially maintained and/or signed MTB tracks are welcomed where appropriate to the area, although by its nature, orienteering cannot be restricted exclusively to such routes.

## APPENDIX I

Orienteering is an adventure sport where competitors compete on a set course combining cross-country running and navigational skills. At an orienteering event, there are usually a number of courses graded according to the level of navigational difficulty and fitness required. Individuals start at time intervals and the object is to reach certain predefined locations on a map and complete the course as rapidly as possible.

Competitions are held at local, regional, provincial and international level. Competitors are offered a number of courses at local and regional events. They can select a course based on their skill and fitness levels. At provincial, national and international level, courses are age based with the open events open to anyone who wishes to compete at that level.

In order to compete, one needs map reading skills as the purpose is to make one's way to certain 'control' points in a prescribed order, check in at the control points and get to the finish as quickly as possible. Competitors start at time intervals, often 3 minutes between competitors on the same course, which results in a time trial element to the competition.

Events are normally held in forest or open countryside, often in areas that would be relatively unknown except in the local vicinity, and it certainly has introduced orienteers to parts of the country where they would be unlikely to travel otherwise. There are a small number of events held annually in parks or town streets.

In principle, the competition schedule is decided before the start of the orienteering year. Each event is assigned to a club(s). The club is charged with registering the event (to ensure that it is covered by insurance) and seeking permission from the landowner to hold the event.

All ages are welcome to participate including children and senior citizens. Each individual can decide for oneself whether they want to stroll around the course and enjoy the view/countryside or run to the best of one's ability with the intention of producing a personal best. The sport is intended to be accessible to all regardless of age, navigational ability or level of fitness. Orienteering is also a key element of the military training provided to the defence forces and the national reserve forces.

It is family friendly and also appeals to elite athletes (who can map read while racing). It is becoming more widely introduced in schools both at primary and post-primary level and is a core element of the skills taught in adventure centres. This is largely because there are both educational and health benefits associated with participation. The educational benefits include being able to read and improve map-reading skills, becoming familiar with geological features in the environment, appreciation of the environment and nature around us, organising and planning events and the management of the electronic equipment to facilitate competition. Many experienced orienteers graduate to mapping areas. Many competitions are equipped with electronic punching requiring organisers to have a certain level of technological skills.

It certainly caters for a greater variety of ages than most other active sports. It provides many people with a healthy and active outlet.

There are a number of variants of orienteering including mountain bike orienteering, trail orienteering and ski-orienteering. In Ireland, there is a small but growing community participating in mountain bike and trail orienteering. Trail orienteering provides an opportunity for physically disabled persons to participate provided that there is a trail network suitable for wheelchair access.

A nominal fee is charged to cover the costs of maps and equipment. Events are run on a volunteer basis.