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|  | | Minutes of Meeting of the Sutherland Local Access Forum held in the Chamber, Drummuie, Golspie on 6 March 2017 at 2pm. |
| **Present:** | | Mr J McGillivray, Councillor, Highland Council  Mr J Ross, Scottish Canoe Association/Access User  Mr P Olson, Access User |
| **In Attendance:** | | Mr M Dent, Access Officer, Highland Council  Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Highland Council |
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| **1.** | **Appointment of Chair**  Mr J McGillivray seconded by Mr P Olson moved that Mr J Ross be appointed as Chair of the Local Access Forum.  On there being no other nominations, Mr J Ross was duly appointed as Chair. | |
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| **2.** | **Apologies for Absence**  Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr M Macdougall and Mr W Sutherland. | |
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| **3.** | **Minutes of Meeting of 31 October 2016**  There had been submitted for confirmation as a correct record, the minute of meeting of 31 October 2016, the terms of which were **APPROVED** subject to ‘P Olson’ being added to the list of those present.. | |
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| **4.** | **Matters Arising**Inclusion of Core Paths on OS MapsDiscussion followed on representations being made by the Mountaineering Council of Scotland and Ramblers Association to have core paths included on OS Maps. The Chair suggested that as the information on core paths for Highland was already stored electronically on the Council’s website there was a question as to whether it was necessary to include them on OS maps. In addition, the very nature of core paths was that they would be subject to change. The Access Officer advised that a key issue was the fact this matter was not currently devolved to the Scottish Government, the OS being a UK government-owned company. It was anticipated this may change in future which could result in a different position being adopted. He expressed the view that currently core paths were relatively hidden in terms of websites on the internet, and there would be benefits in having a direct link to a searchable map.  Further issues raised on this matter included a suggestion there would be a significant on-cost in including core paths on OS maps and also there was uncertainty whether the OS maps were compatible with Council’s own mapping systems.  Local Planning/Access Issues  Thereafter, the Access Officer advised that the Loch Loyal Lodge planning application was ongoing and that a planning application was still awaited in respect of Coul Links, Embo. He advised that planning applications had been received in respect of Carbisdale Castle for the change of use to a private dwellinghouse. P Olson advised that a public meeting had been held recently at which the proposals for significant investment had been outlined, including plans to construct glamping lodges on the upper slopes of the loch which he understood would be for rent, and he provided further details in this regard.  In connection with the above, reference was made to the formation of Carbisdale Forest Trust and the fact it was unclear at this stage as to its role in respect of the existing paths and bike trails at Carbisdale or any future plans the Trust had for the area. It was noted that usage of the paths around the Castle had fallen considerably since the closure of the Youth Hostel.  The Access Officer advised that development proposals included the construction of two glamping pods in a location which may potentially require a gate to be installed on the Culrain to Invershin cycle path.  The Forum **NOTED** the update on matters arising. | |
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| **5.** | **Core Path Plan Review** The Access Officer reported that since the last meeting progress with the Core Path Plan review had been somewhat delayed by the requirement to undertake strategic environmental impact assessments of all the paths. He advised that in terms of responses to the review, a number of similar general comments had been received in respect of Caithness and Sutherland, as follows:-  Increased users numbers when adopted as a core path  The Access Officer suggested this should be considered as a positive aspect of core paths and advised that landowners had a similar duty of care if a path was promoted or otherwise. He noted that while some land managers were content for access to be taken over their land, they may in some circumstances prefer low numbers, particularly where smaller areas were involved. However he emphasised the aim of the Core Path Plan was to increase access uptake.  The Chair commented on the increasing practice of placing items such as garden gnomes etc on paths and the fact some landowners may consider this type of unusual littering had been caused by increased access as a result of a core path. It may also detract from the core path for some users.  Disturbance to deer and stalking activities  The Access Officer suggested that issues of disturbance may be one of perception, observing that core paths were not generally in hill/ridge areas where such activities took place. In areas where there may be an issue, it was suggested that estates could be more proactive in terms of providing information to access users, for example through the erection of signage when stalking was taking place.  Disruption to forestry activities  The Access Officer advised that core paths did not necessarily increase access rights, and that non-core paths used by the public also had to be managed accordingly. In relation to this item, reference was made to situations where signs closing off paths remained in place despite their being no obvious signs of ongoing works activity. It was also explained the main reason for routes being closed off was due to the wide safety zone required for the harvesting machines, loading activities and also where forest tracks were being upgraded, for example to provide windfarm access. There may also be issues around contractors not adhering to the management plan for works which had been carefully prepared by land managers.  In summary, the Access Officer advised that comments in relation to disruption to deer and stalking activities and forestry activities had not been considered reasonable objections to a core path by the Reporter in respect of the existing Core Path Plan, albeit there would be the potential for unique circumstances to be taken into account as part of the review. He advised that as a general principle he would defend the use of core paths unless there were some specific reason he/the Forum was otherwise minded.  Thereafter, the Access Officer also reported on comments received which were site specific, as follows:-  Railway Crossing, Dunrobin  The Access Officer confirmed his intention to keep this crossing in the Core Path Plan, advising that its inclusion had been supported by the Reporter during the previous consultation on the Plan. He reminded the Forum that the Scottish Law Commission had published a report/white paper on railway crossings which clarified that if the land was classed as a core path then access rights should apply.  Embo Mains  The Access Officer indicated that concerns on this matter related to the fact a path passed through an area used as a pig farm, which it was suggested created a bio-hazard. He had revisited this area and observed there was a path around the pig farm which both provided a resolution to the matter and also avoided the need for access users having to use the nearby public road.  Balblair Woodland, Littleferry  The Access Officer advised that concerns expressed on this matter related to the fact that some paths in the area were impassable and that he had raised this matter with Sutherland Estates. He reported that since the last meeting the Estate had been undertaking works in the area which had included considerable path clearance. In discussion it was observed that the Estate was generally proactive in ensuring core paths were passable.  Kinlochbervie  The Access Officer referred to routes he had initially proposed be investigated as potential core paths at Achriesgill and south of Kinlochbervie to a private house at Kinsale. However, having seen photos of both routes his intention was not include either in the Plan, given there was a substantial burn on the Achriesgill path and difficulties in the ability to see the other path clearly on the ground. In regard to Achriesgill, this was a public right of way and he had raised this matter with Scotways with a view to it being signposted accordingly.  In conclusion of this item, the Access Officer indicated that he would continue to work through the Core Path Plan review on a settlement by settlement basis. He explained that the new Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 required him to notify landowners where there was a proposed new core path and therefore it was taking time to undertake property searches etc in this regard.  The Forum **NOTED** the update on this item. | |
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| **5.** | **Future of Local Access Forum** J McGillivray advised that following the last meeting he sought advice from the Council’s Depute Chief Executive in regard to the statutory requirements and future arrangements in respect of the Local Access Fora. He advised that a response had been received to the effect that in terms of the statutory requirements the Council was required to establish at least one Local Access Forum but that it was considered a single Forum would be strongly resisted by Council Members. In terms of the way forward, a review was being carried out and items under consideration included a reduction in meetings to one per year with other consultations by email only, and the possible merger of existing forums to mirror the Access Officer areas**.**The Chair advised that his assumption was the future of the Fora would be a matter for discussion for the new Council, following the elections in May 2017. In this regard, it was suggested that the preference would be to retain the Sutherland Local Access Forum given the geography of the area and the move by the Council towards localism. It was also suggested that two meetings per year would not be unduly onerous and would provide for more continuity. Thereafter, the Access Officer advised that the membership of the Forum was due to be refreshed on the basis the current members had served their four year term of appointment. He explained this may provide an opportunity to widen the breadth of membership, for example to include more community or voluntary group representatives. It was anticipated the process around appointments/reappointments would commence shortly.  The Forum **NOTED** the update. | |
| **6.** | **AOCB**  **Planning/Local Access Issues**  The Access Officer reported on the following matters:-   * Rosehall House – a planning application had been resubmitted which involved a change of use to the building. He advised that a core path ran close to the property; * Sutherland Estates – it was explained that the Estate had been selling off a number of properties, including Balblair Cottage, which was likely to be renovated and the garden ground extended, noting which would require a planning application. The core path ran close to the rear of the property although it was not anticipated there would be a problem from a core path perspective; * Camore Wood – the Council had purchased land in this area, and reference was made to the opportunity for the local Member and community council to have discussions with Forestry Commission Scotland to formalise a new car park on the Evelix side; and * Melvich Common Grazings - reports had been received about locked gates on the Common Grazings and he would investigate this matter further prior to considering whether it should be brought as a formal item to the Forum.   The meeting closed at 3.20pm. | |
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