**Caithness Local Access Forum**

**Minutes - Action Note**

**Meeting held on 28 August 2019 in Caithness House, Wick at 1400 hrs**

**Present**:

Jay Wilson (JW) - Friends of the John O’Groats Trail - Vice Chair

Bill Mowat (BM) - Dunnet & Canisbay Community Council

Donna Mather (DM) - British Horse Society Scotland

Ben MacGregor (BMG) - Pentland Canoe Club

William Bruce (WB) – Caithness Kayak

Jan McEwan (JM) – Caithness Disability Access Panel

*In attendance*:

Matt Dent (MD) - Access Officer

Paul Castle (PC) – Highlife Highland Countryside Ranger

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| **Item** |  | **Action** |
| 1. | **Apologies**  Islay Macleod – Thrumster Estate  Cllr Karl Rosie - Chair  Janet Banks – Wick Community Council  Jay Wilson took the chair |  |
| 2. | **Welcome and Introductions**  Jan McEwan was introduced as the new representative of the Caithness Disability Access Panel – those around the table introduced themselves to Jan.  Paul Castle was introduced to those around the table as a Countryside ranger for North Sutherland and North West Caithness. Paul is not a member of the forum.  DM asked MD is there were any vacancies on the forum, MD stated the forum had a full compliment of those representing community and access users group interests but was short of land owner/occupier representatives (2 spaces) |  |
| 3. | **Notes from meeting of 14 January 2019**  JW introduced the draft minutes   * BM moved to approve the minutes * WB seconded this motion. |  |
| 4. | **Matters Arising**   * **Halkirk to Sibster Path:**   **(First raised: *pre 09/17*, Date Closed: *ongoing*, Ownership: *KR* )**   * KR not present to update the forum. * BM expressed opinion that the forum should be very supportive of this proposal * WB explained that the forum had visited and looked over the large ditch and ground beyond the built trails towards Halkirk. * MD explained that what is need is a group to sponsor/or take up the proposal mainly so funding could be applied for. So far neither the Community Council or Village Council had taken a long term interest, unknown if issue with land owner consent etc. * MD to liaise with KR to write to the two local council bodies to see if worth pursing and keeping issue on the LAF agenda * DM raised issue with horse box parking area always been used for stone/aggregate storage when the trails would be good for equestrian use. MD to contact Forestry and Land Scotland. * **Scrabster to Quarry Path:**   **(First raised: *Pre 09/17,* Date Closed: *ongoing,* Ownership: *MD)***   * Installation of new gate still ongoing. MD to contact owner direct to see if he would contribute to install costs. THC agreed with farm manager to pay for gate and aggregate but not install. * PC said this route had been investigated for guided walks from cruise ships, climbing the fence adjacent to the locked gate would be a significant barrier to these users * **John O’Groats Trail (JOGT)**   JW provided a review/update of the JOGT   * Good summer on the trail with an active ranger programme being undertaken offering guided walks and a number of improved stiles. * There has been a 4 fold increase in long distance through hikers (end to end users of the trail), in July 2018 there were no records in the trail log book with 25 registered in July 2019. * Trail is still rough in place and this is promoted clearly on the Facebook and website for the trail, nevertheless attracting international attention and mainly positive feedback from users. Views from the route noted, though asking for further improvements. * Volunteers have been strimming and cutting vegetation where required. * Through hikers estimated at 1 per day since May with estimated 14 bed nights each day from all trail users. * Next steps are for funding built path sections to improve user experience, reduce path maintenance and alleviate pressure on land managers.   BM praised the work of JW and suggested the Forum write to the funders to acknowledge this work and there assistance for the only long distance path north of Inverness.  BMG commented he had met walkers on the trail and they had to re-route themselves and double back on some sections due to vegetation growth.  **North Highland Way**  JW mentioned the North Highland Way (NHW) which shares a route with the JOGT from Duncansby Head to JoG but then heads west to Durness. JW said they were looking to link with the north coast route but it was early days yet.  BM said some work on the NHW had been done around Gills Bay, MD suggested this was possible Ian Ellis who manages one of the NHW websites and is involved in self guided walks of the route.  See <https://easyways.com/walking-holidays/north-highland-way/>  And <http://www.northhighland-way.com/>  Separately Tina Irving is also developing the NHW, an online survey for crofters is available here  <https://northhighlandway.co.uk/crofting-scotland-survey/>   * **Coastal Path East of John O’Groats**   **(First raised: *Pre 09/17,* Date Closed: *ongoing*, Ownership: BM)**   * The John O’Groats Development Trust had been unsuccessful in the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund application in early 2019. BM said the trust was looking to employ someone to submit further applications to this, should there be other rounds, as well as other funding sources. * BM reiterated some of the history of the beach regards the sand removal by government and the poor coastal protection installed by the council to project the path. * MD explained that caravan site proposal had been taken to, and approved by, the Caithness area committee in February. * The development trust, in partnership with JOG 2 Ltd who lease the site, have started a car parking donation scheme. If successful MD suggested a new coastal path may be a high priority project which would by-pass the caravan site route. * WB said a number of the kissing gates on the path beyond the caravan site had broken hinges. MD said he had no power to maintain these gates but would look at them when next visiting. Using Community Payback was discussed but MD not sure if they had any capacity or would work on a site without expressed land owner consent. JM suggested name of Steven MacDonald from payback team, MD to contact Steven. * **Sandside Estate**   **(First raised: *09/02/17*, Date Closed: *ongoing*, Ownership: *MD*)**   * MD contacted agent again in August, still no feedback from owners. * MD visited last week and found gate half off it hinges, half open in a half falling position. He fully opened the gate and left it open. * Monitor for March 2020 LAF meeting   15.10 – Bill Mowat left the meeting   * **Yarrows**   **(First raised: *09/02/17*, Date Closed: *ongoing*, Ownership: *IM*)**  IM not present to update the forum   * MD reported he has visited the site in Summer 2019, given the predominately dry weather the ground was reasonable to pass but the Long Cairn route from the car park still evidently heavily poached. So no worse/no better. * No progress on the tenant providing new paths to the broch or long cairn as per the planning permission approved by THC.      * IM to report position of Yarrows Heritage Trust (YHT) to forum? * If no progress on either front (tenant or YHT) can this item be closed? MD to sign existing core path, replace gates and improve surface as powers under Land Reform Act (and capacity allows) * **Keiss Shore Sign**   **(First raised: *09/01/2018*, Date Closed: *ongoing*, Ownership: *MD*)**   * After several emails with no reply MD has taped over the poor wording on the sign. Follow up for March 2020 LAF meeting. * DM? mentioned a planning application in relation to the site. MD aware, allow planning process to go through and see if core path is diverted. * Change issue to poor gate. * **Whaligoe Fence**   **(First raised: *15/08/2017* Date Closed: *ongoing*, Ownership: *MD*)**   * As actioned at last meeting MD trying to seek feedback and comments from Community Council through Cllr Bremner. Not present at this meeting, carry forward as no response from Community Council.   **Altnabreac Crossing covered by item 5.** | **MD/KR**  **MD**  **MD**  **MD**  **MD**  **IM**  **MD?**  **MD** |
| 5. | **The Highland Council Core Paths Plan - Caithness & Sutherland - Amended**  Following the January LAF meeting the modifications to the amended Core Paths Plan (Caithness and Sutherland) were put to area committee in February. There was just one modification affecting Caithness and that was the extension of the existing core path at the Lybster Coastguard Look out to Swiney Hill and Forse Castle.  Altnabreac Crossing and John O’Groats Path to DUncansby vuia the Caravan site were retained in the amended plan despite outstanding objection.  The modified plan was put to public consultation in April and May 2019. No representations were made regards the modification at Swiney Hill and Forse Castle.  The amended and modified core path plans (Caithness and Sutherland) will be sent to Scottish Ministers in August 2019. It is not know when any inquiry will be help but MD stated he hoped it would be early 2020 and it would be done by written representations. |  |
| 6. | **Access Officers and member Report – new cases not previously reported to the forum**  **Dunnet Track**  DM raised an issue of a track in poor condition in the Dunnet area. Not shown on core path map so forum was unsure of location, DM to confirm this with MD. Advice from forum members was to discuss with locals and local community groups, land owner sounded positive but reply to DM was they were busy with other priorities just now.  Not a Land Reform Act issue, DM to follow up and report to back to forum as required.  **JOGT**  JW reported new fence started north of Auckengill harbour/broch Car park. Strainers in but no wire. JW not sure if going to be an issue, report to forum as required.  WB asked if any guidance about using barbed wire on fences adjacent to paths, MD said not aware of any.  **Dunnet Forest signs/map**  JM raised an enquiry from the access panel regards information at Dunnet Forest as to the location of the nearest public toilet facilities and detail on the accessibility of the various trails within the forest.  PC stated the toilets at Seadrift were seasonal and closed down when the caravan site shut up for the winter.  MD said the number of trails built and operating at Dunnet Forest in recent years had increased. MD to contact Dunnet Forest  **Dunnet Links**  DM said she had been criticised online for posting suggestion on taking access with horses over dunes at Dunnet Links.  There is an access track suitable for equestrian use to the beach avoiding the dunes . No restriction on equestrian access is in place on the Links but PC said they encouraged all access takers to stick to existing paths. | **DM**  **JW**  **MD** |
| 8. | **Any Other Current Business (AOCB)**   * DM raised issue of sub-group within LAF with a fundraising interest. No interest so far to suggested to her, follow up with joint action holder KR? | **DM/KR** |
| 9. | **Date of Next Meetings**    Agreed at 9th March 2020 and 7th September 2020  JW asked about interim meetings, forum suggested it would be happy to meet again if items were forthcoming to form an agenda |  |

Meeting closed at 16:15 hrs

**Jay Wilson**

**Vice-chair**

**Wednesday 29 August 2019**