

Caithness Local Access Forum – Minutes and Action Sheet

Room 1, Caithness House, Wick

Monday, 11 March 2024, 3pm

Present:

Willie Bruce (WB)
Mark Gibson (MG)
Donna Mather (DM)
Karl Rosie (KR)
Jay Wilson (JW)

Cllr K Rosie in the Chair.

In attendance:

Matt Dent (MD) Access Officer
Gillian MacPherson, Committee Officer (minutes)

Item		Action
1.	Apologies Cllr Andrew Jarvie, Ben MacGregor, Eilidh Willoughby	
2.	Notes from previous meeting Minutes agreed to be a right and proper account of meeting.	
3.	Matters Arising MD confirmed the old track from Castletown to Murkle Hill appeared to be well used and would be added to the list of core paths for review. Regarding the No Parking signs at Loch Watten, MD confirmed it was a privately owned car park, and not owned by Highland Council.	
4.	Caithness Local Access Membership MG was welcomed as a new Forum member, proposed by KR and seconded by DM. The Forum hoped to welcome members from a land management/owning background in addition to National	

	<p>Farmers Union (NFU), Crofters Commission and Forestry members.</p> <p>It was agreed that KR and MD would write to NFU and the Crofters Commission to enquire their availability.</p>	KR, MD
5.	<p>Review of Caithness Access Issues and Initiatives</p> <p>There had been circulated a brief from the Outdoor Access Manager regarding the Local Access Fora restructure.</p> <p>MD stated that he was no longer a full time Access Officer and informed the Forum that over the last 5 years, 6 Access Officers had been reduced to less than 3 full time equivalent officers. It was said that the number of Forums had to reduce.</p> <p>During discussion, the following points were raised:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • meetings would take longer, and community members might be less inclined to travel; • it was enquired how many meetings each option offered and it was confirmed that it would continue to be 2 per year; • it was felt that none of the options would benefit Caithness and offering less of a service wasn't in anyone's interest; • the budget decision had been made and it was recognised that cuts were inevitable, but the Forum was disappointed that this was the case; and • it was felt that Caithness and Sutherland should not be grouped together as it made for a huge area. Concern was raised regarding disengagement and that this might detract from issues within the local area. <p>Thereafter, the Forum opted for Option 1 but wished to note their disappointment.</p>	
6.	<p>Table of Caithness Access Issues and Initiatives</p> <p>MD provided a verbal update, as per the report circulated prior to the meeting.</p> <p>Halkirk to Sibster path – Halkirk Village Council had withdrawn their agreement with the landowners, which meant there was no longer a body to drive the lease/licence agreement forward.</p> <p>Before MD wrote to the landowners, and with funding coming from the Halkirk Community Benefit Trust, it was asked if the Association of Northern Trails Scotland (ANTS) could become the administrative Board, with the support of the Council.</p>	MD, JW

	<p>In terms of the bridge being a flood risk, it would need an abutment, and it was owned by Forestry and Land Scotland.</p> <p>JW was asked to take this proposal to ANTS before MD wrote to the landowners. JW asked for previous correspondence to be forwarded to him and it was agreed that would be done after this meeting.</p> <p>MD to progress, which would include re-negotiating with the Halkirk Community Benefit Trust regarding funding.</p> <p>Keiss Shore Sign – the Forum discussed the wording on the sign and the condition of the gate latches. To be followed up by MD.</p> <p>Mireland Access Gates – it was said that the bridge was in poor condition and there was still a chain around the gate, with a padlock. It was confirmed that while it looked locked, it was unlocked. It was agreed that this case was closed.</p> <p>Sandside Cliff Top Locked Gate – the Forum agreed to close this case.</p> <p>Achairn/Camster Wind Farm Gate – it was confirmed that the area remained a live construction site, and while cyclists and pedestrians could access the area via a cattle grid, there was not yet suitable access for equestrian use.</p>	<p>MD</p>
<p>7.</p>	<p>Core path diversion at Gerston, Halkirk</p> <p>MD presented a diversion to the current core path at Gerston, proposed by the new owner of the property named Riverside.</p> <p>The core path as it was appeared to be very well used, dating back most likely pre-First World War, but it was very close to the property, with Riverside’s driveway being part of the core path.</p> <p>Having installed CCTV, the new owner counted over a weekend, 158 adults, 51 dogs, 21 prams, 6 bikes and 8 children passing less than a metre away from their living room window. It was said that the majority of people looked through the window and many dogs were not on leads. The owner had raised fears of security, dog foul, litter and noise nuisance.</p> <p>During discussion, the following points were raised:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the property was purchased with the path there; • concern was raised regarding those who lived in Gerston, who would face a lengthy diversion to reach the river; 	<p>MD, KR</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • there were financial implications. It had been confirmed that Halkirk Community Benefit Fund would consider an application to fund the re-routing but that their preference would be that it was funded by the Council. However, it was felt by the Forum that this would not be an appropriate use of funds; • the property included land that was not part of the core path, including a walled garden which would allow for privacy, although it was felt that the purpose of this meeting was to discuss access, rather than privacy; • the number of people counted in the CCTV extract evidenced how well the path was used; and • it was said that consideration should be given to the community too. A recent consultation heard that the community want more walks and it was suggested that a path using the proposed diversion could be created, without altering the core path, with the idea that it would reduce footfall. <p>Thereafter, it was suggested that this case be considered formally by this Forum and a meeting would be arranged as soon as possible to ensure a timely and appropriate response was provided to the property owner. An update would be provided to the Forum at the next meeting.</p>	
8.	<p>Access Rangers 2024</p> <p>With no funding for the upcoming year, the Access Rangers' last day of employment was to be 27 March 2024.</p> <p>The Forum shared their disappointment – not just the loss of the Rangers but the loss of the tourist data they collected. However, it was understood that having public conveniences, bins and car parks with picnic sites would be considered a higher priority.</p> <p>It was felt that the determination of fund spending should come from the localities as the needs in Caithness could be very different to other areas.</p> <p>In terms of donation boxes at parking sites and public conveniences, this had been successful and would continue, and it was asked if the area could use cashless donation points similar to the West Highland Way.</p>	
9.	<p>AOCB</p> <p>MD had attempted to make contact with the landowner regarding the stones blocking the Stoupster Road to Rockhill Road track at Nybster, and it was confirmed that the issue would be added to the Table of Access Issues and Initiatives.</p>	MD

	In other news, MD explained that Highland Council Rangers were filmed 2 years ago as part of a television documentary which included NC500, Wick and Caithness, and it was to be released in Australia this week.	
10.	Date of next meeting 9 September 2024	