

Caithness Local Access Forum – Minutes and Action Sheet

Room 1, Caithness House, Wick

Monday, 28 April 2025 at 3.00pm

Present:

Willie Bruce
Mark Gibson
Ben MacGregor
Donna Mather
Karl Rosie
Eilidh Willoughby

Cllr K Rosie in the Chair.

In attendance:

Matt Dent (MD) Access Officer
Gill MacPherson, Committee Officer (Minutes)

Item 5: Alison Downings, Owner, Old Distillery House

Item		Action
1.	Apologies There were no apologies.	
2.	Notes from previous meeting AGREED minutes of the meeting held on 9 September 2024 to be a right and proper account of meeting.	
3.	Matters Arising Local Access Forum Review An update was provided. An ongoing challenge was the capacity of Access Officer. The service had decided not to modify the existing Local Access Fora setup (7 Local Access Forum covered by 3 Access Officers and 1 Access Manager). Halkirk-Sibster Link Since the last meeting, the Access Officer had been in touch with the Association of Northern Trails, members of the Village Council, and Forestry and Land Scotland. There was enthusiasm to move forward, however, repairs, maintenance and long term sustainability of the path, had to be considered.	

	It was hoped that Forestry and Land Scotland would assist with the bridge over Halkirk Burn. Local community consultation might be required, and it was hoped that a local newsletter would be distributed before the Summer. Auchengill to Common Grazing An update was provided and it was thought that there remained locked gates. Fencing had replaced a removed gate, and overall access to the common grazing was restricted. The Access Officer would visit the area with Forum members. The Forum NOTED the updates.	
4.	Access Rangers Recruitment for Access Rangers was underway and an update was provided. The posts were to be funded by Highland Council. The Access Officer explained the role of the Access Ranger and how the Forum could contact them. Thereafter the Forum discussed locations that would benefit from a ranger, and considerations such as litter, parking and road safety were highlighted. The Forum NOTED the update.	MD
5.	Core Path Diversion – Halkirk Riverside Since the last meeting, various feedback in relation to the core path diversion had been received by the Access Officer and Chair. The Chair reported that there was opposition to the diversion. The owner of Old Distillery House provided a background to the current path. It had been used originally by the distillery's horse and cart. After the distillery closed, the path became quite quiet, however it was becoming increasingly busy. The path passed through the garden and parking area of Old Distillery House. The owner raised concerns which included an increase in traffic and uncontrolled dogs. The Forum understood that the owner did not wish to restrict access to the path. She sought a long term solution, such as a suitable diversion. The Access Officer shared a map of the proposed diversion and then clarified the following points:- • the differences between public and private rights of way;	MD

	- the differences between public rights of way and core paths; - public rights of way were not included in land registry titles; and - amendments to core paths required consultation. During discussion, the following points were raised:- - it was commented that the Old Distillery House was used for short-term lets. The owner suggested that the focus on it being a business was becoming increasingly personal. The Access Officer provided a response; - an attractive and appealing new path would likely encourage walkers to use it; - a site visit was requested; - information was sought, and provided, regarding any precedents set. The Forum had previously accepted a diversion which would avoid people passing close to a cottage in Braemore Estate. The cost of the works and maintenance were considerable; and - consultation to change the core path required the Council to promote an alternative path, however, the Council was not promoting an alternative path. Thereafter, the Access Officer provided advice to the owner of Old Distillery House on how she might prepare an alternative path without diverting the core path. The owner would liaise with the Access Officer to ensure that it would be of acceptable standard. In terms of communicating with the public that an alternative path would be available, it was suggested that this could be included within the local newsletter. The Forum NOTED the update.	
6.	AOCB Altnabreac Station The train station had recently reopened after being closed due to access issues. It had been reported to a Forum member that a member of the public had been challenged by a nearby householder when walking along the path. A photograph of the location was shared with the Forum and the Access Officer clarified the position of the core path. Should the Forum receive further reports, these should be forwarded to the Access Officer. Braemore/Dunbeath Estate	All

The Forum was informed about recent changes to the access to Glutt.

Where there used to be a kissing gate, there was now a locked gate. Further along the path there had been installed recently 2 deer fences with high gates. There was no provision for horses, cyclists or pedestrians.

Any feedback would be forwarded to the Access Officer.

Blingery Trail

There was a short discussion regarding fencing on the trail.

The Forum was informed that a cattle grid had been removed due to wind farm traffic, but it was not known if the cattle grid would be put back in the future.

The Geise Walk

Members of the public were being charged to use the path and it was asked if this should be the case. The Access Officer explained that there should not be a charge as the path was not a core path.

The Access Officer would write to the land owners to inform them. It was thought that ownership of the land had changed.

It was appropriate however for the public to be charged to access the petting zoo or parking.

Access to Dunnet Bay Beach

There was a discussion regarding the various access points to the beach, with particular reference to provision for horses, buggies, and disabled access. The following points were raised:-

- suggested routes included via the dunes, via the campsite, and round the forest;
- sections of the paths required flattening and were not currently suitable for wheelchair users;
- walking or riding on the roads was to be avoided if possible;
- the Access Officer said that the Council was looking at a project that did not involve rubber matting; and
- the mid sands were not an appropriate access point as the sand could slip at any time. Signage was suggested.

The British Horse Society Representative and Access Officer would carry out site visits.

	The Forum NOTED the information provided.	
7.	Date of next meeting The next meeting would be held on 15 September 2025. Meeting ended at 4.25pm	