

## Unconfirmed Minutes

### National Access Forum – 66<sup>th</sup> Meeting

Hybrid Meeting: 11<sup>th</sup> June 2025

#### Present:

	Representatives	Organisation
1	Richard Barron	Convenor - National Access Forum (NAF)
2	Ali Tait	Secretary - National Access Forum (NAF)/NatureScot
3	Bridget Jones	NatureScot
4	Colin Galbraith	Chair - NatureScot
5	Brian Eardley	Scottish Government
6	Frank Spencer-Nairn	Association of Deer Management Groups
7	Helene Mauchlen	British Horse Society
8	Billy More-Nesbitt	Historic Houses Scotland
9	Steve Jenkinson	Kennel Club/Scottish Kennel Club (KC/SKC)
10	Rhiannon Law	NatureScot
11	Nikki Howard	Scottish Orienteering Association
12	Caroline Fyfe	NatureScot
13	Stuart Younie	Mountaineering Scotland
14	Nick Cole	Local Access Forums representative
15	John Cowan	Police Scotland
16	Roy Barlow	Woodland Trust
17	Adam Streeter-Smith	National Park Authorities representative
18	Rebecca Fraser	British Association of Shooting and Conservation
19	Graeme McLean	Scottish Cycling
20	Hugh McNish	Scottish Forestry
21	Eleisha Fahy	Scotways
22	Phil Waite	Local Authorities representative
23	Fiona Murray	Forestry and Land Scotland
24	Simon Ovenden	Scottish Land and Estates

Apologies: Stuart MacQuarrie (NatureScot), Richard Hunter (CONFOR), Gavin Corbett (Ramblers Scotland), Jim Densham (Cycling UK), Richard Armstrong (Paths for All now WalkingScotland)

#### Item 1. Welcome, introductions and apologies

1. Richard Barron opened the meeting and welcomed members to the 66<sup>th</sup> meeting of the National Access Forum.
2. Richard reported that shortly after the last NAF meeting Mairi Gougeon MSP was in touch requesting information about the use of Section 11 orders. To ensure a quick response for the Minister, NatureScot responded via Scottish Government with no further action required by NAF.
3. Richard represented NAF at the Scottish Forest Strategy Meeting - 50-year Visions on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2025. Outdoor access was mentioned by most speakers at the meeting, though there are still opportunities to improve access such as connecting forest tracks to form circular routes, but access is very much being considered.

A key issue identified in the afternoon working groups was a gap in public awareness of what forestry is about. The public love trees but don't understand forestry. A comparable point was raised in respect to farming and other forms of land-management and use.

4. Richard thanked NatureScot Alan Macpherson and Eileen Stuart, who are retiring, for their valuable contributions to NAF on a variety of access topics over the years.

## **Item 2. Minutes of previous meeting, action points and matters arising**

5. The minutes of the 65<sup>th</sup> meeting were confirmed as a true and accurate record of the meeting (with minor corrections identified).

**AP 63/2:** NatureScot reps to discuss format options with NatureScot CEO/Chair for input and agreement – *discharged*

**AP 65/1:** NAFSec to send summary of comms activity for SOAC anniversary out to NAF members when available – *discharged, item 5*

**AP 65/2:** Bridget to bring paper to next meeting, on signage/access management, to inform actions after that – *discharged, item 9*

**AP 65/3:** Bridget to contact Scottish Wildfires Forum to ensure fit with NAF/VMS guidance - *discharged*

**AP 65/4:** NatureScot to resume talks with Network Rail – *discharged*

**AP 65/5:** Richard Barron and Sue Hilder to draft letter to Fiona Hyslop separately then send to sub-group – *deferred*

6. With regards to APs 65/4 and 65/5, Sue Hilder (Private Level Crossings (PLCs) and Core Paths (CPs) sub-group Chair) and Richard Barron have prepared a letter to send to Cabinet Secretary for Transport Fiona Hyslop, but following an update from Gavin Corbett, the letter has been put on hold.
7. The PLCs and CPs sub-group was put on hold at the end of 2024 as Network Rail reviewed their position. Further correspondence between The Highland Council and Network Rail has now addressed the issue, and clarified that active local case specific matters, such as Dalwhinnie, will not be brought into sub-group discussions.
8. The sub-group aims to resume its work shortly and build on the progress made to date. It is hoped that work can resume swiftly on the draft protocol and that this can be completed over the next two meetings.
9. Simon Ovenden reported that he attended several productive meetings at Dalwhinnie last year, working towards a potential practical solution. Phil, Eleisha, Adam and Simon to have separate discussion regarding Dalwhinnie after NAF meeting.

## **Item 3. NatureScot Chair**

10. Colin Galbraith (NatureScot Chair) thanked the forum for inviting him to the meeting. Colin congratulated Richard as the new Convenor and the forum for how well it works together. The Forum has a key role in access and how NatureScot does its work.
11. Colin is keen to celebrate the access legislation we have in Scotland. He worked for Scottish Natural Heritage when the legislation came in. Prior to that he was involved in the preparation of the Comeback Code following Foot and Mouth disease.
12. Colin highlighted the important role of access and how it helps the public connect with nature in Scotland. Access and ensuring a public connection that leads to caring, value and respect for nature remains important to NatureScot. A key area of focus for all is ensuring access to nature and the outdoors is possible for everyone and developing those opportunities.
13. The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and the Natural Environment Bill were highlighted. The NatureScot Board is at a critical time, developing the new Corporate Plan leading up to 2030. The next 5 years will be key for nature, climate and access. What big issues are coming up in access over the next five years? How can NatureScot take these on board? The role played by the Scottish Government and NatureScot is key. How do we justify and secure the resources needed? A recent NatureScot Board visit to Mull highlighted the potential for private funding sources to help.
14. Colin recently met with Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport Maree Todd who is supportive of the benefits of having good access to the outdoors. Broadly, there is government/parliament support for access. Recognising the links between access and the economy, tourism and the wellbeing agenda. NatureScot remains committed to providing leadership and direction. The discussion was then opened up to members of the forum for questions and comment.
15. Fiona Murray confirmed that FLS are looking at external funding sources and suggested that it would be helpful if there was shared information between the public agencies about what funding options are being explored. Colin agreed there is enormous potential for joined up government agency working and a common understanding of what everyone is trying to achieve would be beneficial. Building resilience is an important part of the solutions and an essential argument, particularly in light of climate change and all the associated challenges.
16. Adam Streeter-Smith – the economic value and well-being benefits of access were recognised during foot and mouth disease and Covid-19. There has been a significant step-change in how people enjoy the outdoors and in recreational activities. It is important to improve the evidence base used to inform future solutions aimed at addressing impacts of recreational activities such as those on nature and nature recovery, leading to nature and people thriving together.
17. Colin highlighted examples of local communities stepping up to protect local species e.g. white-tailed eagles. Recognising that conflict exists, but people and nature can co-exist. Wants NatureScot to focus on building understanding going forward. As we are facing twin crises, we need to be willing to change and take some risks.
18. Phil Waite asked about funding that would have been allocated to the proposed Galloway National Park (which SG has decided not to move forward with) being allocated to access in other areas of Scotland. Some areas e.g. Lochaber/Skye are very busy with visitors but have few resources to manage the pressure. Brian noted that the budget for a new national park would have come through parliamentary process.

19. Stuart Younie pleased to hear that access is still at the core of NatureScot work. Resources continue to be a major issue – how can the forum members most effectively engage with ministers? Colin advised an approach that showed consensus –and recommended thinking big geographically. Also to present the case in the context of helping with the twin crises and resilience and to consider private funding potential. With regard to rangers, their importance and key role was acknowledged, but Colin acknowledged the difficulty of resourcing. There continue to be big asks made of NatureScot across a broad range of work.

Nick Cole highlighted the role of local authorities and local access forums. Over the last few years, Local Access Forums (LAFs) have been stretched in terms of resources – financial, but also in terms of support from access authorities. LAFs are in the centre of many access issues, but support for and between Local Authorities (LAs) and LAFs is inconsistent. They also face difficulty when recruiting, especially landowners. There is no national over-seeing authority above LAFs and many LAF volunteers are tired of providing advice that is not heeded. How can NatureScot, potentially through NAF, help? Colin noted the resources issue being highlighted again and also the value that LAFs provide with many relying on volunteers and there is an opportunity to give this greater recognition.

20. Simon reported that there is frustration amongst landowners in respect to managing access rights and in particular the public’s knowledge of the SOAC. NatureScot has a key responsibility in educating visitors and the wider public. Simon receives around 12-15 e-mails to do with irresponsible access per week. LAs often aren’t able to provide help, with Access Officer numbers reducing across the access authorities. SLE would like to see more education, engagement and additional “teeth” for those unwilling to behave responsibly. Colin can follow up with Dee Ward of SLE. Simon also suggested that some of the visitor levy schemes revenue should be used to help resource access.

#### **Item 4. Operating Principles Update**

21. Ali Tait presented a paper considering the need for a review of the operating procedures of the forum and suggesting a number of key areas that may require review and updating. The forum was asked for their views and advice on the next key steps. Since its creation, the forum has regularly taken stock of its role, purpose and composition.

22. The membership has evolved over the years with agreement for new roles established for a National Park Authorities representative, a Local Authorities representative (previous role was a COSLA rep), Local Access Forums representative, PoliceScotland and a Paths for All representative. In addition, other organisations have stepped back including SportScotland, Scottish Water and VisitScotland.

23. Key areas for a review and update to focus on:

- purpose of the forum
- forum membership
- wider interests
- operation of the forum

24. NatureScot is recommending that the operating principles are reviewed and updated during 2025 and to assist this has highlighted the key areas for the forum to consider:

- are the current operating principles fit for purpose?
- what key areas or aspects should any review and update focus on?

- are there areas or aspects that can be omitted from review?
- how would the forum like to be involved in helping NatureScot update the operating principles?

25. It was agreed to set up a small working group to consider the paper further and provide advice to NatureScot.

**AP 66/1:** NAFSec to set up working group to provide advice for NatureScot on updating forum operating principles.

#### **Item 5. SOAC – 20 Years of Access Rights in 2025**

26. Rhiannon Law (NatureScot Communications Officer) updated the forum on the SOAC at twenty years comms work done by NatureScot since the Feb 2025 forum meeting. The aim is to celebrate SOAC throughout 2025.
27. The 20 years of access rights and SOAC press release in Feb 2025 reached nearly 50,000 people. NatureScot staff were interviewed by various media outlets. The Make Space for Nature podcast series had an episode with Brendan Paddy (Ramblers Scotland Director). The SOAC20 brand toolkit has been launched for partners and external organisations with anniversary-themed resources that can be downloaded from the SOAC website and incorporated into digital content as well as designed assets and templates for posters and leaflets - [outdooraccess-scotland.scot/branding](https://www.scotland.scot/branding).
28. Spring campaign highlights – a mix of radio, social media platforms and popular Scottish influencers were used to spread the word about responsible outdoor access. Radio adverts reached over 1.5 million Scottish adults (36% of the adult population). Each person on average heard the message about 5-6 times.
29. On social media, NatureScot used both Meta (Facebook/Instagram) and Snapchat to reach different age groups. Meta worked well for connecting with older audiences (55% of engagement came from over-65s), while Snapchat helped NatureScot reach the under-35s.
30. The influencer part of the campaign saw Sean the Sheepman creating engaging content about keeping dogs on leads near livestock. Caroline McQuistin from Skye and outdoor enthusiast Josh from Black Scottish Adventurers, helping reach diverse audiences.
31. The mix of platforms was successful in reaching different audiences, from teens to over-65s. Using popular influencers like Sean really boosted engagement - comments on the videos were overwhelmingly positive and up 59% from last time. For summer there will be a more targeted approach aimed at reaching key audiences more precisely through the digital activity.
32. NatureScot ran a small project fund of £20,000 which supported nine organisations to produce a range of resources to celebrate the anniversary, raise awareness, and improve understanding of access rights and responsibilities.

Young Scot, British Horse Society Scotland, DMBinS, and Clackmannanshire Council all made videos of varying lengths for different channels that highlighted the principles of SOAC in relation to specific activities.

Aberdeenshire Council and West Lothian Council used their funding to buy materials to engage young people using SOAC-themed interactive games.

33. RSPB Abernethy focused on promoting responsible dog walking via their Paws on the Plateau initiative.

Aberdeen City Council produced signage for shared use paths

ScotWays updated and distributed their "Public Access in Scotland: know your rights" leaflet.

34. NatureScot will continue to use content from influencers and advertising on social media and radio to highlight the anniversary, alongside our summer seasonal messages.
35. NatureScot is also working to refresh the SOAC website to provide clearer navigation paths for the public and land and access managers. This is to ensure that the content is accessible and easy to find and reflects the current range of outdoor activities and ways that people access information and the outdoors. A key aim is to make the range of NAF and others supporting guidance easier to find particularly for those involved in managing access on land.
36. Following on from the launch of the brand toolkit, there will also be redesigned graphics in formats suitable for sharing on social media and for on-site posters and editable sign templates for land managers, access managers and rangers; focusing on key code related topics.
37. Other planned activities include more anniversary-themed episodes of the Make Space for Nature podcast; case studies of access success stories published on the website and some pop-up banners for use at events and National Nature Reserves.
38. Fiona highlighted that more weight needs to be given to responsibilities, especially around working sites, referencing [Managing public safety on harvesting sites](#) guidance by Forest Industry Safety Accord. The guidance could fit well on the SOAC website, with more emphasis on land manager rights and responsibilities. Phil asked that Access Officers be given the opportunity to input into the new version of the guidance.

Nick reported that Angus and P&K LAFs are jointly working on an information leaflet with Scottish Forestry.

## **Item 6. SOAC Supporting Guidance Review Programme**

39. Caroline gave an update on progress with updating SOAC related guidance.
40. Four guidance documents were brought back to the forum for approval, following the Feb 2025 forum meeting: Local Access Forum – Guide to Good Practice; Deer Stalking and Public Access – Guidance on Stalking Communication; Commercial Access to the Outdoors in Scotland – Local Management; and Foraging in Scotland.
41. The forum was also asked to approve: Open Fires and BBQs in the Outdoors – Advice for Managing the Public; and A Brief Guide to Laws Relevant to Outdoor Access in Scotland.
42. The forum was also asked to respond to the questions in a scoping paper - Guidance on Third Party Promotion of Outdoor Access in Scotland. Adam noted ongoing issues around drones and the lack of clarity in context of access rights.

43. The forum approved: Local Access Forum – Guide to Good Practice; Deer Stalking and Public Access – Guidance on Stalking Communication; Open Fires and BBQs in the Outdoors – Advice for Managing the Public; and Foraging in Scotland.
44. The forum requested further consideration of Commercial Access to the Outdoors in Scotland – Local Management; and sought additions to the Brief Guide to Laws Relevant to Outdoor Access in Scotland.
45. With regards to the Commercial Access guidance, Phil requested a stronger statement in the guidance to ensure companies put something back by way of a financial contribution. Fiona also asked for some more clarity on definitions e.g. charity vs company. It was also noted that it's difficult to measure scales of commercial events, at what size does it become an event etc?
46. It was agreed that a sub-group would be put together to look at the Commercial Access guidance and to also consider how it relates to the outdoor events guidance.

**AP 66/2:** NAFSec to set up first meeting of commercial access guidance and outdoor events guidance sub-group.

47. The delay to approving the Commercial Access guidance will allow time for the updating of the events guidance, and alignment between the two can be achieved through the sub-group.
48. There was further discussion about other commercial activities and whether to include commercial facilities or services e.g. ski areas/mountain-bike parks. Sub-group to decide scope of work at first meeting.
49. All NAF approved supporting guidance will be reviewed every 3 years, with any factual technical updates, addition of case studies as required. The fires guidance will be revisited at the end of summer 2026 as this is an involving area and then put onto three-year review cycle.
50. With regards to the Brief Guide to the Law, Adam would like to see mention of the Animals Scotland Act 1987 and more detail on management rules for the benefit of land managers and access staff etc.
51. Caroline invited comments on the inland water guidance which can be submitted directly to Caroline or via [NAFSec@nature.scot](mailto:NAFSec@nature.scot).
52. NatureScot presented a new “Approved by the National Access Forum” graphic which is to be used as the “stamp” of approval for guidance. It was approved for use by the forum.

#### **Item 7. Orienteering and Wildlife Disturbance**

53. Nikki Howard (Scottish Orienteering Association) presented a paper covering an issue that has been reported by an increasing number of clubs – refusal of permission to run events, with landowners citing wildlife disturbance and/or damage to habitats.
54. Orienteering events generally do not operate under access rights and SOAC as it requires some small pieces of temporary infrastructure and therefore permission. Participants don't generally follow paths and can come into contact with wildlife; it is generally a low impact sport. Local groups work with landowners to plan courses that avoid sensitive sites. Habitat regulation

assessments are undertaken if required. There have been some reports of automatic refusals for events with no opportunity for further discussion.

55. The asks placed on clubs in respect to permissions can increase administration by a significant amount.
56. Steve noted his experience with Natural England; what is disturbance pathway and what needs to be restricted? Have to highlight people and nature, not people vs. nature. Is there detail held by NatureScot about designated sites and its protected characteristics etc? Bridget confirmed that there is.
57. Phil noted his experience with The Highland Council – specific consultation events conducted when looking at asking people to limit/change their activity.
58. Nikki reports that private landowners generally better to work with; understands that public organisations are short on time. Fiona noted that FLS doesn't have a consistent approach and are having conversations to improve this internally.
59. Points from discussion to be taken into commercial access guidance and outdoor events guidance sub-group discussions.

#### **Item 8. Irresponsible behaviour**

60. PC John Cowan updated the forum on an issue of livestock worrying/attacks by dogs at Conic Hill in Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park. A meeting to discuss this issue with local organisations was held on 29<sup>th</sup> May. Lower lambing percentages have been recorded; local police have received 20 reports over last five years. Conic Hill receives approx. 250,000 visitors per year and there is an ongoing issue around dogs not being under close control or on leads with some visitors refusing to put dogs on leads. Police Scotland have put together a working group and wanted to highlight the case to the forum.
  61. Steve Jenkinson had attended the working group meeting about Conic Hill and highlighted the wider context around dog control, visitor behaviour and access rights. Also, the need to consider site-specific sensitivities and factors alongside how people use or want to use the area, trying to make it easier for people to be responsible. Byelaws are not a universal solution, and full consideration is required on the best mechanisms to address the issues in a proportionate way.
  62. Phil linked the discussion to the signage paper (Item 9). Sometimes a grazing area is not recognisable as a field for livestock to the general public. Need better signage. He reports higher tolerance of stricter signage (dogs on leads as opposed to under close control) during lambing.
- AP 66/3:** NAFSec to send out meeting note from Conic Hill working group meeting to forum members for info.
63. Nick raised the long running problem of irresponsible camping at Loch Clunie in Perth and Kinross Council area and how it can be very difficult to take action against irresponsible campers who are having a negative impact on local communities and other visitors as well as wildlife.
  64. On camping, Phil reported that numbers seem to be decreasing post-covid e.g. at Ceannabeinne. The site is more controlled now after making it look more managed and local consultation to restrict some areas.

## **Item 9. Resources for Access**

65. Richard provided an update on behalf of Gavin who chairs the sub-group. The subgroup met on 2 June 2025.
66. Funding for path improvement work - the group is aware that the Improving Public Access scheme ran from 2015-22 and provided £12m of funding through the agriculture payments scheme for improvements to path and related infrastructure. The funding scheme has been suspended since 2022. The subgroup is increasingly concerned that the new and emerging tier 3 funding scheme has no confirmation of provision for access related investment and, as we understand it, this would leave Scotland in a weaker position than England and Wales. The subgroup is recommending that the NAF convenor write to the Cabinet Secretary seeking assurances that Improving Public Access or an equivalent access support scheme will be provided as part of Scotland's agriculture and rural development programme plans. The subgroup would prepare a draft for the convenor – this was approved by the NAF.

**AP 66/4:** Convenor to send letter highlighting lack of funding with Agri Reform Programme to CabSec.

67. Follow up to meeting with Cab Sec earlier in the year to discuss access resourcing - the former NAF convenor wrote to the Cabinet Secretary on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2024 to highlight the consequences of under-funding and under-capacity in the institutional machinery which oversee the operation of Scotland's access system. This resulted in a meeting with the Cab Sec and a number of members of NAF at the start of the 9<sup>th</sup> January 2025. One of the key actions from that was a shared interest in getting an up-to-date profile of current capacity and funding in access authorities. An ad hoc group has been set up engaging members of the Scottish Outdoor Access Network (SOAN) to develop a proportionate monitoring system with a view to making recommendations to the Scottish Government and engaging COSLA and NatureScot.
68. A further area which was discussed with the CabSec and is supported by NAF, is the opportunity to use this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of SOAC to increase public messaging on access rights and responsibilities.

## **Item 10. Signage Paper**

69. Bridget presented a signage paper as requested by the forum at the February meeting. Noting that Paths for All (now WalkingScotland) was not in attendance and that they have recently update national guidance on signage it was suggested that this could be deferred to the September meeting. Bridget also noted the already considerable workload of the forum. The connection between this topic and the PLCs and CPs sub-group was highlighted. The forum decided to move further discussion to next meeting.

## **Item 11. Forthcoming Meetings and Agenda Items**

- NAF meeting - 17<sup>th</sup> September 2025 – Battleby/hybrid
- Agenda item
  - signage
  - operating principles
  - SOAC comms update
  - SOAC guidance review update
  - NAF/LAF

## **Item 12. AOB**

70. Ali gave update on NAF/LAF preparations. Aiming for late October on-line meeting, date TBC. Ali and Nick to organise, any volunteers welcome. Nick has produced survey for LAF Chairs, which Ali has sent out. The feedback from this will shape the agenda of the meeting. Also, may be valuable to get any feedback on the updating of the NAF operating principles.
71. Foot and mouth disease – Following discussion on the SOAN knowledge hub, Bridget contacted SG and has a meeting coming up to discuss access accommodations in existing plans.
72. SOAN Conference – 13<sup>th</sup> November, Battleby. 20 years of access. SOAN LR(S)A 2003 training has gone live on Knowledge Hub for initial testing but SOAN members, due to launch later in year.
73. Fife Coast and Countryside Trust - recruiting for a Senior Access Officer here at FCCT (deadline 29th June).
74. On the day of the NAF meeting a parliamentary question was being asked by Ariane Burgess the Scottish Green party MSP for Highlands and Islands (Question reference: S6O-04776) "To ask the Scottish Government what funding allocations it has made, and plans to make, to enable local authorities to fulfil their statutory duties to uphold the statutory right of access to outdoor spaces, commonly known as the right to roam."

**AP 66/1:** NAFSec to set up working group to provide advice for NatureScot on updating forum operating principles.

**AP 66/2:** NAFSec to set up first meeting of commercial access guidance and outdoor events guidance sub-group.

**AP 66/3:** NAFSec to send out meeting note from Conic Hill working group meeting to forum members for info.

**AP 66/4:** Convenor to send letter highlighting lack of funding with Agri Reform Programme to CabSec.