

National Access Forum Update – January 2021

Summary of main topics - National Access Forum virtual meeting 27 January 2021

The new Convenor Don Milton chaired the meeting, thanking David Henderson Howat again for his four year term as Convenor and for his valuable assistance during the transition.

Mediation -

The NAF Mediation Guidance Note is now published on the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) website and was circulated to members for further dissemination. The offer of a 'building skills in mediation' session hosted by the Scottish Outdoor Access Network (SOAN) for access staff was confirmed as well as a briefing at the NAF/LAF meeting.

Outdoor Access with E-Bikes –

The Convenor provided feedback from the recent NAF sub group meeting. A £36k research project managed by British Cycling and funded by Forestry England, Natural Resources Wales, NatureScot, Scottish Forestry and British Cycling is now out to tender. The project which will report by the end of October will help all partners plan for a future of off-road cycling using e-bikes. The study will involve an investigation of current and likely future trends in e-biking; and site-based surveying of users of off-road bikes. A Scottish sub-group, organised by Developing Mountain Biking in Scotland (DMBinS), will feed into the GB Stakeholder group. The Forum agreed with the recommendation from the sub group to await the findings of the research before taking any further action. However, consideration of promoting existing guidance on access with bikes was suggested due to the growing number E bike sales.

Mapping Scotland's Paths -

Ramblers Scotland gave a presentation on the Mapping Scotland's Paths project which aims to create a national digital dataset of Scotland's paths. The West Dunbartonshire trial showed there were twice as many paths as were currently on OS maps. The current phase is extending the dataset nationally and using volunteers and technical solutions to audit paths on the ground. The project has funding until November 2021. Forum members sought reassurance about landowner consultation and expressed interest in being involved as volunteers to audit paths. A further update will be provided to the Forum in the autumn.

Visitor Management Strategy -

NatureScot provided an update on progress with partnership work to address national visitor management issues for spring 2021. Current priorities being actioned are; co-ordinated messaging including a high profile welcome campaign for visitors emphasising the importance of enjoying Scotland's outdoors responsibly, and joint promotion of more specific messages from SOAC on key issues such as dogs, fires, camping and litter. Recruitment of additional staffing especially seasonal staff is underway. Collaborative management at key hot spots (National Parks, NC500, Highland Perthshire and East Lothian) will test new approaches to visitor management. An overview of visitor infrastructure (car parks, toilets, campsites and waste disposal facilities), is being mapped against visitor management pressures to identify new requirements as a key to effective visitor management.

Members welcomed the update and offered advice on targeting visitors before they arrived (UK and European visitors) and agreed on the need for co-ordinated and consistent messages. Traditional media as well as social media was highlighted as being important as well as the need to get messages out as early as possible. They also supported the emphasis on new visitor infrastructure to allow visitors to access the countryside responsibly.

Informal camping guidance -

A small working group has been reviewing the Forum's guidance on managing camping with tents. It was agreed that a final draft would be circulated round the Forum for any remaining comments before being finalised and signed off by the Convenor.

SOAC plans for 2021 -

NatureScot outlined potential priorities for SOAC promotion in 2021. These included items raised previously by the Forum eg. responsible camping, access with dogs, litter, fires and human waste as well as a focus on "entry level" messages about responsible behaviour and the existence of the Code. Responding to the pressures resulting from COVID-19 this year's SOAC campaign will be set within the context of the national Visitor Management Strategy and will be a co-ordinated effort across a range of public bodies using traditional and social media to reach the broadest audience as well as target groups. Members offered advice on; reviewing the 'Know the Code before you go strapline, the need for local applicability of messages, more guidance and training support for land managers, inclusion of social campers as a target group, and opportunities to connect with schools to deliver messages on line.

Forward work plan-

The Forum discussed a draft work plan for and an accompanying work programme tracker. Members agreed with the topics listed and suggested new ones covering; IPA input to any new scheme, inappropriate signage, wider impacts of Covid-19 on health, wellbeing and equality in relation to access to the countryside, climate change and impacts on access & travel, grants for land and forestry. The work plan and tracker would be populated accordingly and regularly reviewed.

Improving Public Access 2021-

The Forum was informed about the new Agri-Environment Climate Change Scheme which includes a fund for Improving Public Access (IPA). The scheme opens on 1 March till 30 June 2021, with the IPA's menu of capital items largely the same e.g. path construction, signage, gates, benches etc. but there will be improvements to the specifications and supporting guidance. Decisions on applications are expected to be made at the end of the year, with successful projects being delivered in 2022. For further details: www.ruralpayments.org.uk

NAF/LAF Joint meeting 26 March 2020 –

A small working group met on the 4 December to refresh the NAF/LAF joint meeting programme, and the new draft NAF/LAF programme for 26 March 2021 was presented to the Forum for comments. Members thought that the programme would not be achievable in a 'virtual setting' and suggested dividing the programme into two separate events. Other members were keen that the programme was more forward looking rather than focusing solely on current visitor management issues. The subgroup will reconvene to draft a new more interactive and manageable programme and a separate mediation event.

Future NAF meetings –

The next Forum meetings are: NAF/LAF Joint meeting **Friday 26 March 2021**; NAF meeting **Wednesday 2 June 2021**, NAF meeting either the **15 or 22 of September 2021**. These meetings will continue to be 'virtual' rather than face to face until the current guidelines change.

For more information or comment on any of the above topics, please contact the NAF Secretary – Janice Winning (NAFsec@nature.scot ; 0131 316 2639). Further information can be found on the National Access Forum pages at <http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com/access-forum/>.