

## **Aberdeenshire Local Outdoor Access Forum (ALOAF) First Report – 2005-2008**

### **What's All This About?**

The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 requires 'local access forums' to be set up across Scotland to advise local authorities and others on applying the new legislation on "responsible outdoor access" and to assist in the resolution of access disputes. After a number of public meetings, the Aberdeenshire Forum started work in early spring 2005, and covers non-motorised access, e.g. walking, cycling, and horse-riding, as well as canoeing on inland water. We offer this report as a record of our work for the period 2005 – 2008. Any comments on our work will be welcomed!

### **What Do We Do?**

The Forum covers the whole of Aberdeenshire apart from the Cairngorms National Park area (which has its own Forum, as does Aberdeen City). We have met about 6 times a year, usually at Thainstone Mart, with meetings open to the public. The main purpose of these meetings is to formulate advice on a variety of access topics, for example:

#### **Development of the Aberdeenshire Core Paths Plan**

**Core Paths Plan (CPP):** ALOAF members attended several of the public "drop-in" meetings held during the first consultation round in 2006, and have commented a number of times on subsequent procedures and Plan drafts. The development of the CPP has occupied around 20% of the Forum's regular meeting time since October 2005, featuring on every agenda. One special Forum meeting and one Annual Gathering have focussed entirely on the Plan. A Forum Working Group assisted with ALOAF's formal response to the 1<sup>st</sup> Draft CPP. ALOAF is a statutory consultee on the Final Draft of the Plan.

#### **General issues, e.g. privacy around houses; equestrian access**

**Privacy around houses:** A Forum Working Group developed a draft methodology for assessing the degree to which access might affect privacy of a dwelling. This has been trialled with the help of local members of the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association (SRPBA), and is intended primarily to help Council officers take the most objective approach possible when access and privacy issues arise.

**Equestrian Access:** During summer/autumn 2008, a Forum Working Group researched and formulated a set of guidelines on various issues related to horse-riding in Aberdeenshire, e.g. interaction with other users (especially cyclists), land management concerns, etc. The work included 3 working group meetings, supported by individual research, over a period of about 6 months. A leaflet for Council and public use will follow.

### **Specific issues, e.g. access disputes; access and major developments**

**Access dispute – Riverside access 1** (Jan – Nov 2006): an angling club approached the Forum about access along a 400-metre stretch of the bank of the River Don where access was being denied by the owners of a commercial building and its surrounding land. The owners refused to enter into a formal ‘dispute’ process, but a Forum Working Group surveyed the area (from the opposite bank!), and advised that, without prejudice to the final status of the ground, the two parties should be able to come to an amicable agreement without endangering commercial usage.

**Access dispute -- Riverside Access 2** (Nov 2005 – May 2006): a Community Council was not satisfied with the advice of Council Officers over public access to a riverbank in a major Aberdeenshire town. A Forum Working Group considered evidence from all sides (landowner, Community Council, and Council), and supported Council officers’ view that minor openings in the fence would give adequate access to the riverside area.

**Major developments – AWPR:** Starting in November 2005, a Forum working group reviewed successive versions of the plans and provided our views to the project’s environmental consultants.

**Major developments – Menie Estate:** This planning application reached the Forum’s agenda in January 2007. In August 2007, the Forum responded to the Council’s consultation on the outline planning application. In 2008, the Chair gave a submission to the public local inquiry. The Forum is maintaining a watching brief over provision of public access for golf complex clients, local residents and the general public, as and when the development goes ahead.

### **National and Council strategies involving access**

**Links with national organisations:** The Forum maintains links with the National Access Forum. An SNH officer serves on ALOAF, and an officer of the Paths For All Partnership attends many of our meetings in an observer capacity as well as being available to provide advice at any time.

**Aberdeenshire Council’s Strategic Priorities:** A number of these relate to outdoor access, and the Forum is kept informed by officers on these and how they relate to the Single Outcome Agreement process.

**Haddo Country Park Regeneration Project** (from Sept 2006) : at the request of Project consultants, a Forum Working Group conducted an on-site appraisal and supplied a 7-page “review” of current access at Haddo Country Park, with recommendations specifically for wheelchair and visually impaired users.

### **Organisational and promotional activities**

We have:

- held an Annual Gathering each year for the interested public
- adopted (and revised) a set of Operating Principles
- issued a leaflet about ALOAF.
- held site visits for training and discussion purposes, e.g. at Haddo Country Park, and at Strathorn Farm near Old Rayne
- provided ALOAF information on an Internet microsite hosted by the Aberdeenshire Council website  
([www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/outdooraccess/forums](http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/outdooraccess/forums)).

- *participated in annual National Access Forum/Local Access Forums joint meetings, and a number of other national or regional training events and symposiums.*

### **What Does This All Cost?**

The Forum's running costs, for meetings, training and related expenses, amount to approximately £5000 per year, which is drawn from the Land Reform budget within Planning and Environmental Services. As a statutory body, the Forum's costs relate favourably to the Council's overall expenditure on access.

An element of Council staff input is necessary for the Council's statutory obligations to be met. It is also beneficial in helping to achieve a Forum which functions effectively. In its turn the Council benefits from advice received and from partnership working on a variety of issues. Staff input is provided by an Outdoor Access Officer, for whom this is one of several core tasks, in conjunction with other specialist support (legal, environment planner, and secretarial) as necessary.

### **Who Are We?**

The Forum has a membership of 16 Representatives (each with a Reserve) from four fields of countryside interest: access users, land management, communities, and agencies (the Council itself, Scottish Natural Heritage, NHS Grampian, and Forestry Commission Scotland). All but one of the Representatives are independent of Aberdeenshire Council and all have a broad range of experience (e.g. farming, all-ability access, hillwalking, horse-riding, estate management) and residence across the Shire. A list of current Representatives is given below. Regular attenders at our meetings include an adviser from the Paths For All Partnership, and Council staff, in particular Colin Miller (Access Officer) and Linda Mathieson (Environment Planner). The Chair and Vice-Chair are elected every 2 years, and we have begun a system of membership rotation.

### **ALOAF Representatives -- Pen Portraits**

*Bill Ashcroft (Communities):* Bill is a retired academic living at Kincardine O'Neil, for which he has written a walks booklet, and has recently joined us as a new Representative.

*Molly Atkinson (Access Users):* Molly is a keen horse-woman, being on the British Horse Society Scotland committee. She is Chair of the Crathes, Drumoak and Durris Community Council.

*Neil Buchanan (Agencies):* Neil is Physical Activity Co-ordinator with NHS Grampian.

*Dan Cadle (Agencies):* Dan has joined us recently from Forestry Commission Scotland's office near Huntly, replacing Alan Harper who served faithfully from our start.

*Peter Dawes (Access Users):* Peter is an aviation consultant but also co-author of "25 Walks In and Around Aberdeen". He lives in Banchory, and has recently worked on the Deeside Way.

*Bill Dow (Communities):* Bill hails from Oldmeldrum, and as a wheelchair user (and a member of the Central Aberdeenshire Access Panel) keeps us well aware of the needs of such users.

*Alison Espie (Land Management):* with a Masters degree in Land Economy, Alison works from Dinnet as an independent conservation adviser, and has extensive experience in Deeside.

*David Finlay (Land Management):* David is an estate manager at Newtonhill.

*Tom Johnston (Land Management -- NFUS):* farming livestock near Huntly, Tom is a Vice-Chair of the North-East Scotland committee of NFU Scotland.

*Robin Maitland (Land Management -- SRPBA):* based in Banchory, Robin is Head of Land Management with a leading firm of estate agents.

*Brian Martin (Communities):* living at Fyvie, Brian is Chair of the Formartine Partnership and Vice Chair of Fyvie, Rothienorman & Monquhitter Community Council.

*Gordon McKilligan (Communities):* Gordon farms near Cornhill, and became Vice-Chair in May 2008.

*Cllr. Debra Storr (Agencies):* Debra represents Aberdeenshire Council.

*Ken Thomson (Access Users):* Ken is a semi-retired agricultural and rural economist, and a keen walker. Re-elected as ALOAF Chair in July 2007, he is also current Secretary of the Cairngorm Club.

*Paul Timms (Agencies):* Paul is Operational Manager (Grampian) with Scottish Natural Heritage.

*Owen Vaughan (Access Users):* a reservoir engineer working in the oil industry, and living at Pitcaple, Owen is a director of the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

**Representatives** are supported by **Reserves** who are available to deputise for their sector at meetings. Agency sector Reserves are as follows: Aberdeenshire Council – Cllr. Michael Watt; Forestry Commission Scotland –

John Risby; NHS Grampian – Calvin Little. The NFUS Reserve is Andrew Robertson, and the SRPBA Reserve is David Fyffe. Current non-organisational ALOAF Reserves are: Geordie Burnett-Smith (Land Management) from near Peterhead; Alison Mitchell (Access Users) from Aberdeen; and Linda Miller (Communities) from Peterhead.

In conclusion, for an organisation which is now well into its 4<sup>th</sup> year, and with a complement of more than 20 members, it is natural that a number of former members have moved on from ALOAF. Although space prevents individual mention, their contribution has been substantial and is duly recognised here.

## **Contact Us**

For more information about the Forum, please contact the Chair, Ken Thomson, tel. 01224 743655, email: k.j.thomson@abdn.ac.uk; or the Council's Outdoor Access Officer (North), Colin Miller, tel. 01467 628481, e-mail colin.miller@aberdeenshire.gov.uk.

## **ALOAF Membership Update – June 2009**

*Tom Johnston (Land Management)* has stepped down and is replaced by *Drew Elphinstone*.

*Cllr. Isobel Davidson* has been appointed as Aberdeenshire Council Representative, the post formerly occupied by *Cllr. Debra Storr*.

*Ken Thomson (ALOAF Chair)* demits office in July 2009 on completion of his 2<sup>nd</sup> 2-year term. He continues as an *Access User Representative*.

*Owen Vaughan (Access User)* has stepped down and selection of a replacement is pending.