

# MINUTE OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE SCOTTISH RIGHTS OF WAY AND ACCESS SOCIETY

**Held in The British Horse Society, Stirling Agricultural Centre and on Zoom  
on Saturday 22 November 2025 at 2.30 pm.**

**Present:** Bob Aitken (Honorary Vice-President), Katharine Taylor (Chair), 5 other Directors plus 20 members in person, 11 members joining online.

**In attendance:** Alison Riddell (National Secretary and Treasurer), Eleisha Fahy (Senior Access Officer), Johanna Babbs, Neil Feggans and Karen Lowrie (Access Officers), Neil Birch (Access Officer, Outreach), Finley Jackson (Administration and Communications Assistant).

## 1. Apologies

Apologies were offered on behalf of 11 members:

Lindsay	Anderson	Peter	Hildrew	Ian	Provan
Katrina	Barron	John	King	Alison	Wood
Richard	Barron	David	Langworth	Peter	Wood
Norrie	Grant	George	Menzies		

A proxy had been lodged on behalf of one member in favour of the chair.

The Chair, Katharine Taylor, welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked the BHSS for hosting us for a second year.

## 2. Minute of AGM 2024

The draft minute had been posted on the Society's website and there were copies available for those in attendance. There being no amendments, approval of the minutes was proposed by Rachel Taylor, seconded by Eric Gotts and carried unanimously.

## 3. To receive the Report of the Directors

Before presenting the Directors' Report, Chair Katharine Taylor introduced the new members of staff: Johanna Babbs appointed to replace Lynda Grant and Finley Jackson, appointed to the new role of administration and communications assistant.

In the course of her report, she identified ten features of the ScotWays year. The first was the steps taken to improve our records and systems. A 10-year rolling programme had been introduced to update CROW, a program essential to our work which enables us to answer queries from a wide range of sources. She noted that Craig Reilly was doing an excellent job of organising and managing our records while director Tim Simons was leading the Operations sub-committee in reviewing and updating all our policies and procedures, a basic but essential piece of work.

As part of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, we updated our brief guide to access law and obtained a grant from NatureScot to print and distribute 20,000 copies of it across Scotland. This provided great promotion of ScotWays and the Code as well as a helpful educational tool.

The 6<sup>th</sup> edition of Scottish Hill Tracks was printed in summer 2024 and was so popular that a second print run was required before Christmas that year. Tim Simons, who led the editorial team, worked tirelessly to promote it, and the many talks he has given about it included a discussion with Paul Murton at the Fort William Mountain Film Festival.

In collaboration with other outdoor organisations, we contributed to the Scottish Outdoor Recreational Alliance manifesto to highlight access concerns that potential MSPs might address in their own manifestos for the 2026 Scottish elections. Members of SORA including ScotWays attended various political party conferences to promote it.

Upholding access rights being key to our work, we have as usual dealt with a number of key access issues as well as responding to numerous consultations and planning cases.

Our signposting work over the past year has included the launch of our Support a Sign Scheme inviting donations to fund a specific sign repair or replacement. It has proved very successful, with nine signs sponsored from its launch until the end of June 2025.

More than fifteen years ago, we received funding from what was then Scottish Natural Heritage, now NatureScot, to set up our Heritage Paths Project. We have now received a grant from Scottish Mountaineering Trust to upgrade the website and further funding to update the information it contains over the next two years.

2024/25 has been a particularly busy year for legal searches, with the number of search requests 20% higher than the previous year. This is a very important source of income for us and has generated about £40,000 more than in 2023/24.

We received some significant legacies during 2024/25 which were particularly welcome when 2023/24 had been very challenging financially. The net result of the increased income from searches, legacies and donations was that we ended the year with a healthy surplus for the first time in some years. This arose from a combination of good fortune and hard work by staff and volunteers, and Katharine expressed her thanks to them all.

Katharine concluded by announcing that she was stepping down as chair and that a new chair would be appointed by the board at its next meeting in early December. She was pleased to report that she left ScotWays in a rather better position than it had been three years ago when she took up the role.

#### **4. To receive the Accounts**

A summary of the accounts had been published in the Annual Report, and full copies were available at the meeting as well as on the Society's website. Fiona Dick, director and chair of the finance committee, provided a summary of the financial position, noting that income was significantly up on last year due in part to the increase in value of the investment portfolio rather than increased cash in hand. Fiona based her presentation on the operational budget and the work towards getting it balanced. Of the total income received this year, £207,841 was from charitable activities, £156,629 from donations and legacies and £8,469 from investments, leading to a surplus of about £110,000. Within

this figure, the Society received several very welcome legacies: from Mrs Margaret Hunter and two other people who obviously valued the work we do enough to include ScotWays in their will. While £89,000 of legacy income was very welcome, it is not something that we could rely on receiving annually. We have a number of very generous donors, some giving fairly small amounts on a regular basis, often through the Charities Aid Foundation. As some of them tick the 'anonymous' box, we are unable to thank them personally but do so here. Last year a regular donor of £20 suddenly decided to give us £10,000, plus Gift Aid, on the basis that it was anonymous, which was extremely generous of them. Following the receipt of about £101,000 from non-regular sources, the operational surplus was positive, for the first time in a while.

Fiona displayed a pie chart showing the sources of income, from which it could be seen that our legacy income over the past year was quite high at 24% while the search service provided about half our income. The search service was very important in fulfilling our mission and generating a steady source of income. We reviewed our charges and introduced a 5% increase last April, slightly over inflation. As there was no pushback, it gave us confidence to increase the rate further in future years. A graph demonstrated the substantial increase in search volume and search fees over the past year.

Turning to expenditure, the major cost was salaries and, at 76% of costs was about average for a small charity. About 5% of costs related to the dedicated software necessary for our work – it had to work reliably and be updated regularly.

Looking at the balance sheet, the main fixed asset was the office which the Society owns, which was included at cost. The change in the value of the investment portfolio reflected the fact that some was withdrawn during the year to balance risk and volatility, £50,000 to assist with cashflow and a further £50,000 to put into a savings account with a high interest rate for a fixed period. Since the end of the financial year in June, the original £50,000 had been reinvested, as the cash was no longer needed immediately. As a result, our current assets and specifically the cash balance had increased. The accounts included the legacy from Mrs Hunter which we had yet to receive but were obliged by the accounting rules to provide for.

The Society had always had some restricted funds, given for a specific use such as signposting. It was noted that the Donald Bennet fund had a small balance of about £1,800 remaining. This year various designated funds had been set up to reflect their intended use. One was for the original purchase price of the office, as there was no intention of selling it. Another was for anticipated expenditure such as software, specialist scanning work and fireproof filing cabinets. That left the general fund with about £20,000 less than the previous year. A lot of work had been done to tidy up the balance sheet. In response to a question, Fiona confirmed that the Legal & Access subcommittee was researching an appropriate increase in the search fee for the coming year.

## **5. To appoint Directors**

The Board was recommending the appointment of four directors, two being appointed after being co-opted during the year and two standing for the first time. They were:-

Lindsay Anderson, proposed by Eleisha Fahy, seconded by John Elliot  
Christopher Huntley, proposed by Tim Simons, seconded by Bob Aitken  
Brian Humphries, proposed by Lynda Grant, seconded by Eric Gotts  
Greg Quinn, proposed by Fiona Dick, seconded by Tim Simons

All were invited to say a few words to introduce themselves before they were appointed.

Brian Humphries had a day job in property management and a long involvement in local charities. He was attracted to the Society as a national charity and had noticed the signposts when walking his three dogs. He had seen the Society was looking for directors and felt he could contribute in the areas of governance and staff support.

Greg Quinn had spent 29 years working for the diplomatic service and left the service last year. He lived at the foot of Bennachie, near Inverurie and was keen to use his knowledge and experience helping others.

Chris Huntley had been interested in and benefitted from ScotWays through his 50+ years of hillwalking and climbing. He was a member of the Scottish Mountaineering Club and keen to maintain links between the two organisations. He was also a former trustee of the Scottish Mountaineering Trust, which largely redistributes the profits of the SMC guidebooks, and he could assist ScotWays with applications to SMC for grants. He was co-opted to the board during the year.

Lindsay Anderson was co-opted during the year after having been an adviser to the Legal & Access subcommittee for over a year. She was unable to attend the AGM, so the Chair said a few words about her. Lindsay is a former solicitor with the Scottish Government and brings a lot of experience and useful contacts to the Society.

All four were elected.

## **6. To appoint an Honorary President**

Director Tim Simons noted that the role of Honorary President had been vacant since 2008 and the Board had been looking for someone to fill the volunteer figurehead position. Paul Murton had agreed to take up the role. Unfortunately, he was unable to be present due to prior commitments, but it followed his involvement in writing the foreword to the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of *Scottish Hill Tracks* and also speaking about it at the 2025 Fort William Mountain Film Festival. From the foreword, it was obvious that he was a passionate devotee of Scottish Hill Tracks, having been brought up near route 96 at Loch Long. Based in Aberfoyle, he was best known for his travelogue programmes across Scotland. Tim proposed and Rachel Taylor seconded that Paul be appointed honorary president for a term of three years. He was duly appointed.

## **7. To appoint the Independent Examiner of the Accounts**

Fiona Dick proposed the reappointment of Whitelaw Wells as Independent Examiner. They had acted for us for the past few years and were very good. She had no hesitation in recommending them. This was seconded by David Dixon and was then approved.

## 8. ScotWays in Action

Eleisha Fahy, Senior Access Officer, started by thanking those in the room who had helped to bring our Land Reform access legislation into effect, as we had this year been marking its 20 year anniversary. While the Scottish Outdoor Access Code is guidance rather than law, it sets out the key principles and a common-sense approach. NatureScot had been adding to this Guidance since 2005, and its website contained a wealth of additional resources which had all been refreshed in this anniversary year. This included the Brief Guide to the Law, to which ScotWays had contributed to refresh the rights of way section. As part of the celebrations, NatureScot awarded grants to promote the SOAC, and ScotWays had received a grant to refresh our own law leaflet. Thanks were due to NatureScot for the grant and to the many volunteers who had helped to distribute 20,000 copies of the leaflet.

We have been working with colleagues in the Scottish Outdoor Recreation Alliance (SORA) trying to ensure that access will feature in the manifestos of the various political parties at the Scottish parliamentary elections in 2026. One request is reviewing the 2025 access authority guidance which has never been updated, a previous attempt having been shelved during COVID. ScotWays having pushed repeatedly for this, with our input, Mark Ruskell MSP has now secured a commitment from the Cabinet Secretary to take forward a review of the guidance.

Eleisha did not touch on all the rest of the access work but expressed her thanks to her access colleagues for all their work despite the staff changes and increased workload over the past year. We had recently had a comment from a member who said that he had joined ScotWays for the walks rather than politics. She hoped that she had shown why we engaged in political activities as the underpinning of our access rights was clearly political.

Information Officer Craig Reilly was to be the next speaker but was absent due to illness. Alison Riddell therefore provided a brief summary of his work, saying that it was largely behind the scenes but very important to the smooth running and efficiency of the organisation.

Data Accessibility: Craig and a team of volunteers continued to work their way through our 1,400+ casefiles, summarising their contents for ease of reference; they are more than a third of the way through to date and he is very grateful to all those helping with this work.

Information Systems: The CAMS project is ongoing, essential software for us to maintain our access records, and Neil Birch and Craig are continuing talks with Idox, the supplier, in relation to its development. Work is also continuing on the development of our photo library to ensure that the large number of photographs we hold are accurately catalogued and so readily retrievable when needed. We will be recruiting volunteers to assist with this work. Craig has been developing our Microsoft SharePoint system to organise all our files for improved retrieval and collaboration on document sharing.

Records Management work: We have a new file plan to help consolidate our digital records, and work has been ongoing in entering information into CROW to keep it as up to date as possible.

Director Rachel Taylor next spoke about the Heritage Paths website. It contains over 400 historical routes varying in length and difficulty, providing historical information, photos and mapping for each one to a greater or lesser extent. Last spring, we received a grant of £2,000 from Scottish Mountaineering Trust for web development work and updating the routes. The web development work was now complete, and volunteers had used data gathered during the SHT surveys to do interim updates of 180 SHT routes that overlapped with Heritage Paths. We have now received another grant to update the records for routes through hilly areas, carrying out on-the-ground surveys, historical research and updating the photos, historical information and mapping of each. New directional signposts and historical-information plaques will be installed and QR codes added to link to the relevant section of the website. There will be volunteering opportunities for this next stage, which will be announced in due course.

Neil Birch, Access Officer (Outreach) then followed up by talking about route surveying. About 200 Heritage Paths are to be surveyed over the next few years, and this will be the start of our rolling ten-year programme to survey all the 9,000+ routes in CROW (which has not been done in a structured way previously). The aim is to launch the project in full next summer, but preparatory work is needed and a pilot scheme is currently underway. It is hoped to enlist the help both of those who volunteered in connection with SHT as well as of new volunteers.

The signpost repair scheme we launched earlier in the year has been successful although our target of fixing a sign within four months of sponsorship has not always been achievable. Of the thirteen repair donations received to date about half have been completed. Our aim is for 25 a year but we are grateful for whatever donations we receive. We will advertise a sign for sponsorship if we are confident we can get the repair carried out. The work is largely being done by volunteers with Neil's support.

When the new Heritage Paths project gets going, new signs will be needed with our name. The target is to repair about a hundred a year, which is roughly in line with what we achieved last year. Many volunteers had been helping with the signpost verification scheme, working to tidy up and reconcile the records held in several different systems. This work is now 90% complete with the remaining 10% of signs being in more remote areas. Only 200 or so are uncertain. Of those surveyed, Neil reported that 42% were in OK condition, and 26% excellent, which was a good outcome given that the average age of the signs was about 20 years.

The final aspect of Neil's work related to communications. Staff capacity had been increased with the recruitment of Finley Jackson as our Administration and Communications Assistant and this was making a significant difference to our output, with social media posts most days and more news items on the website. We had a new PR leaflet and were trying to get more items into the press. The Herald recently picked up our 'Heritage Path of the Month'. Volunteers could help with this by tagging us on social media. Neil also mentioned the new merchandise available through our website.

He concluded by noting how little we could do without our many volunteers and the range of areas to which they contributed, from serving on the Board to distributing leaflets to surveying routes or serving on their local access forum. The pilot route survey project was unlikely to start before 2026, and it was hoped that we could get more people involved with signpost surveying. Karen Lowrie had been of great assistance in helping to clear the backlog of surveys to be logged, freeing up capacity to start receiving them again. There would also be scope to help with records work in the office. In addition, we had applied for a further grant from Nature Scot to print and distribute another 28,000 of our law leaflets, so volunteer help with distribution would be needed in due course.

David Dixon asked for an explanation of the different categories of sign recorded:

- Missing: looked for but absent
- Unknown: about 10% of signs have not been checked for more than five years
- Removed: we have agreed to its removal

Eric Gotts asked if we could seek corporate assistance in replacing signs to help with the backlog. Neil B explained that we had volunteers willing to do the work but that liaising with local authorities and agreeing wording etc all took time.

Bob Aitken asked if we needed more volunteers or more funds? Do we need more volunteers if we don't have the capacity to manage them? He noted that many signs were installed between 1995 and 2000 in partnership with local authorities in the expectation that the local authorities would maintain them, but they have not done so. How should the Society manage that? A total of 4,000+ signs was a huge resource to manage.

Alfie Ingram noted the large increase in search requests and wondered about the impact it had on the rest of the workload. KT responded that the search requests were dealt with by the access team, so there was not a significant impact on for example signposting work. Eleisha explained that the team had identified various efficiencies to get through searches more quickly and so had created capacity to deal with more if there was a glut.

Eric Gotts was very pleased that we had appointed an honorary president and asked if there was a specific job remit. Tim Simons had drafted the specification for the role and discussed it with Paul, the essence of it being general promotion of the Society at talks and events.

Bob Aitken asked Eleisha about the attrition of access services and ranger services. Eleisha explained that the SORA manifesto was aiming to get access resourcing further up the political agenda with a view to having the political representatives recognise its importance. She said that the Society was hearing from local authorities that they were having to focus on their statutory duties and so access was taking lower priority, although access was in fact a statutory duty. She had been discussing the issue with colleagues at SOAN recently.

Alfie Ingram asked what material was used for the current signposts, noting that previously the thought was to encase posts in plastic. This kept the humidity in and so caused them to rust. Neil B said that this had been the industry standard at the time, but that poles are now galvanised.

There being no other competent business, the Chair thanked everyone for attending and declared the meeting closed at 4.23pm.

David Dixon expressed thanks to Katharine Taylor for her work as Chair both during the AGM and in previous years and said how pleased he personally was that she would continue to be on the board until the end of her term in a year's time.

Proposed: asd }

xx/ 11/2026

Seconded: asd }

DRAFT