

Minutes

Pentland Hills Regional Park Joint Committee

12.30am, Monday 24 February 2020 in the Regional Park Headquarters, Hermitage of Braid, Edinburgh

Present:

Voting Members:

City of Edinburgh Council – Councillors Gardiner (Convener) and Bruce.

Midlothian Council – Councillor Winchester.

Non-Voting Members:

National Farmers Union – Bob Barr

Scottish Land and Estates – Ms Scales

In Attendance:

Justin Venton (Midlothian Council), Chris Alcorn (West Lothian), Charlie Cummins Edinburgh and Lothians Greenspace Trust, Caroline Clark (Scottish Natural Heritage), David Jamieson (CEC), Jessica Morgado (CEC) and Blair Ritchie (CEC).

1. Minute

Decision

To approve the minute of the Pentland Hills Regional Park Joint Committee of 30 November 2018 as a correct record, subject to the amendment detailed in appendix 1.

To approve the minute of the Pentland Hills Regional Park Consultative Forum of 22 February 2019, as a correct record.

2. Strategic Management Plan - Update Following Consultation Responses - verbal report by the Senior Natural Heritage Officer

The Senior Natural Heritage Officer reported on the Strategic Management Plan – Update Following Consultation Responses.

She indicated that the consultation period of the final draft of Pentland Hills Regional Park (PHRP) Strategic Plan was completed. The process collated 66 responses via the Consultation Hub and 10 others directly submitted to the PHRP generic mailbox.

Comments received came from a wide range of stakeholders, including farmers/landowners, visitors, residents and organisations such as Nature Scot.

To assist the Joint Committee, the following key themes had been identified:

1. The Plan was difficult to read/ understand
2. Create better access to the PHRP.
3. More tree planting in the PHRP.
4. Stop/ reduce grouse moorland management and heather burning.
5. The Plan was not sufficiently ecologically/ climate crisis ambitious.

To assist with the completion of a meaningful PHRP Strategic Plan, it was recommended for the JC to debate on the following issues:

- Was the Plan too ambitious with regards to the resources available (funding and staff). Should the focus be on maintaining existing assets rather than creating new ones?
- Was the Plan ambitious enough on the actions it proposes to tackle climate change in the next 10 years?
- Was the Plan ambitious enough on the actions it proposes for Nature and ecosystems restoration?

There was a clear division of opinions received with landowners/ farmers concerned that they would be “dictated” what to do on their lands and the Strategic Plan not clearly explaining the benefits for them in operating within the PHRP. On the other hand, visitors felt that landowners/ farmers should play their roles in delivering solutions to tackle the climate crisis/ habitat restoration and for the Strategic Plan to find a way to ensure the opportunity for the 10,000ha of land to be put to the “greater good”.

The consultation process has identified a clear gap with the Strategic Plan:

How to reconcile landowners/ farmers ambitions and rights on their lands, public exercising their rights of access and Nature’s requirements in the lights of Edinburgh’s Climate Emergency situation? Could the creation of a Climate Emergency Action Plan be considered to release the full potential of the PHRP to answer this crisis? There was an opportunity for this Plan to lead and demonstrate innovative approaches with diverse stakeholders and showcase it to the 0.5 million visitors/ year. Was there another Regional Park which could be used as an example?

Discussion took place and the following issues were raised:

- There should be funding from the heritage lottery bid.
- The plan should be more ambitious in addressing climate change and the Council should lead on this.
- Working with landowners and land users should not delay the plan.
- The effect of burning heather.
- There should be an action plan on climate emergency.
- Whether this should be a strategic management action plan.

- The plan would include the management plan, the operation plan and implementation plan.
- There should be greater emphasis on better public access.
- Landowners should be encouraged to plant trees.
- Tree planting was a priority for Scottish Forestry.
- Whether trees were better at absorbing carbon than grass.
- There were funding sources for tree planting.
- There should be more focus on safe walking and cycling.
- Active travel should be promoted and public transport provided.
- Providing better links would be advantageous and could receive funding.
- Some dog walkers were driving to Harlaw, polluting the countryside and sometimes dogs disturbed wildlife.
- The code for responsible usage should be better promoted.
- The Council wanted people to benefit by accessing the countryside, but the effect of camping should be considered.

Decision

- 1) Scottish Natural Heritage to send link to Committee Services when funding was available (to help combat climate change) and for Committee Services to forward this to members.
- 2) The Senior Natural Heritage Officer to put proposals on tree planting into the Operational Plan.
- 3) ELGBT to provide an update to the next meeting, giving more detail on tree planting.
- 4) Scottish Natural Heritage to check if they had enough information on heather burning specifically for the pentlands.
- 5) All members to provide input to the meeting and identify areas for woodland planting in the Pentlands Area.
- 6) The next meeting of the Consultative Forum to consider having Pentlands and climate change as a theme.
- 7) The Senior Natural Heritage Officer to include in the Operational Plan a commitment to access, with the caveat that funding was required for paths, then get more detail for the operational plan.
- 8) To note that there was an issue with providing public transport to the Pentlands and the Parks, Greenspace and Cemeteries Manager to find out who would take this forward.
- 9) The Senior Natural Heritage Officer to circulate the Plan electronically to the members for approval.

3. Update on Heritage Lottery Fund Pentland Path Project

The Senior Natural Heritage Officer gave an update on the Heritage Lottery Fund Pentland Path Project. This included the following:

Background:

Path erosion was a problem in PHRP due to fragility of vegetation, soil, high level of rainfall and high visitor number resulting in extensive path erosion, loss of habitat and landscape impact.

Upland Path Audit:

Edinburgh Lothian and Greenbelt Trust appointed COAT (*Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust*) for upland path audit in 2016 to provide recommendation for project development with CEC as lead authority. The key recommendation was: "To engage with stakeholders on prioritizing paths for a potential capital programme."

Conclusion

- Substantial erosion focusing at "Edinburgh end" of PHRP, on high and ridge routes where use was concentrated. That's where priorities lay.
- Upgrading low level routes (underused now as in bad state) could result in deflecting people away from higher more sensitive routes.
- Project strands around focusing on skills training of younger people in Edinburgh, volunteers etc.
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Capital program suggestion:

- Provide an entire path network within Pentlands that would be sustainable, attractive and open up the entire hill network to a much wider range of users.
- Cost £1.68 million and £2.5 million contingency figure over 4-5 years phased program.

Indicative Costing Path Project

Details were given of the indicative costs for the Path Project

Priority

1. Substantially damaged path; needed to be addressed with real urgency.
2. Deteriorated/ damaged path that needed intervention; may incur much higher cost if allowed to deteriorate further.
- 3: Damaged path; rate of change was slow; could be on hold if funding was not present.
- 4: Vehicle tracks, no capital work required.

The representative of the Edinburgh and Lothians Greenspace Trust (ELGBT) indicated that he had tried to establish if they were still managing to meet the criteria for lottery funding. It was necessary to contact the lottery fund again to determine how would this fit in with their priorities. It might be through the training route. It was necessary to follow up with that. He did not think that there were other potential sources for funding. The overall cost would be considerably more than £1.6 m.

Discussion took place and the following issues were raised:

- Where would the £10,000 come from?
- The key element for the lottery funding was the local authority contribution, which was £180,000 in total.
- It might be possible to get the landowners to help if there were benefits.
- Whether landowners would pay for damage caused by outside forces.
- Edinburgh and West Lothian Councils were both short of funding.
- Developer contributions could be considered.
- It might be possible to use Crowd Funding, the Outdoor Access Trust or the Prosperity Fund.
- The unusual aspect of this lottery bid was that it related to works that were mostly out with council land, therefore a portion would have to externally sourced.
- It was easy to raise funding for tree planting, but paths were more difficult.
- A donation scheme would require a long-term sustainable campaign.
- Glamping or charging might be able to generate funding.
- A social inclusion theme should be included.
- There should be discussions with landowners to progress matters.
- How existing habitats crossed over.

Decision

- 1) The representative from The ELGBT to establish if the criteria for lottery funding was still being met.
- 2) The representative from The ELGBT and the Senior Natural Heritage Officer to meet up with Outdoor Access Trust and report back to the Joint Committee.
- 3) Discussions to take place with landowners to progress matters for raising money.
- 4) The representative from Midlothian Council to find out what type of development contributions might be made.
- 5) The Parks, Greenspace and Cemeteries Manager to contact Planning to ensure there was Section 75 as required.

4. Workplan Delivery Update 2019/20

The Senior Natural Heritage Officer gave an update on the Workplan Delivery 2019/20. This included the following:

Biodiversity:

- Carrying out actions for Edinburgh and Midlothian Biodiversity Action Plans.
- Surveys – 10 public surveys took place, 38 people attended (most ever since the surveys started).
- A volunteer carried out bat surveys at 7 locations in the Regional Park.
- With co-operation from the landowner, the Heritage Service worked with River Life on a project to take cuttings of Aspen in the Regional Park and grow them on to plant back in the Park and on the River Almond and Avon.
- Hillend: 30 more junipers and 40 other trees were planted by volunteers in the Country Park.
- Management of wildflower meadows.

Interpretation/Signage/Marketing

- Retained Green Flag.
- New PHRP website.
- Regular Facebook posts via PHRP page.
- Guided walks and activities.
- Seasonal signage.
- 77 wooden routed signs were surveyed and either removed if no longer needed, refurbished or replaced with new ones.
- Harlaw: Doors Open Day 2019 / Annual Livestock Worrying campaign / Responsible access event / Operation Owl / Hooked on Harlaw in July.
- Flotterstone Glen: livestock awareness events run in association with Penicuik Police.

Friends of the Pentlands:

- Implementation of the Harlaw Wildlife Garden Management plan.
- FoP Tea and Cakes – successful fundraising at Harlaw June, Sept.
- Lead education groups at Harlaw.
- Work squad improved drainage bars on Cockrig section of Maidens Cleugh path.
- Extra drainage put in around Threipmuir car park.
- Upgrade of Permissive path.
- Buckie Brae path and Phantom's Cleugh: drains dug and resurfaced utilizing sheep wool
- Thieves Road (Drovers Road, Harperrig) improving access through installing more sleeper bridges and way marking

Volunteer Ranger Service:

- 7 new volunteer recruited.

- 25 active voluntary rangers.
- 93 day-long patrols completed, and assist with wildlife surveys, public events and guided walks.
- Looking into options to set up a new branch of the Volunteer Ranger Service to carry-out practical conservation work under the supervision of a trained Volunteer Ranger.

Harlaw:

- Harlaw wildlife garden management plan updated 2018-2013.
- Food concession update.
- Drystone dyking association continue to use Harlaw dykes for training and have repaired several fallen sections.
- Camping litter and fires.
- Community Alcohol Partnership.
- Harlaw-Black Spring "Shelter Belt" path upgrade.

Bonaly Area:

- Tree management by volunteers.
- TWIC moorland management report.
- FOP: upgrade of Permissive Path.

Car Park:

- Car park donation box put in January 2019.
- Bonaly Car Park Ownership transfer and new plan.
- Vandalism - Due to vandalism of the stone Stell, significant repairs were carried out by a contractor to make it safe and usable again.

Harperrig, Threipmuir, Swanston, Hillend and Boghall:

- Harperrig: West Lothian Development Trust Fund grants application submitted. Two new pedestrian gates installed.
- Threipmuir: New signs installed.
- Swanston: Attended consultations regarding Pentland Trail Centre. Car park donation box put in January 2019.
- Hillend: Attended consultations regarding "Destination Hillend", ski slope development.

Dreghorn Flotterstone Carlaw to Carlops:

- Visit Scotland Signs to be installed immediately
- Flotterstone Car Park: improvement of area outside Pentland Hills Café Express, donations box broken into twice.
- Filter Beds: £3000 grant gained via ELGB.
- Green Cleugh: Stepping Stones replaced with help from Forestry Department.
- Eastside Farm: Illegal 4x4s.
- Laverockdale area improvement: bridge/ steps / gabions.

Discussion took place and the following points were made:

- Work was being carried on electronic donations for the car park.
- The donations should be uplifted regularly, to minimise the effect of theft.
- Some of the funding money from the HLF bid could be ringfenced.
- Signs could be used to invite donations and explain what their purpose was.
- It would be possible to consider the use of QI codes.

Decision

Members to send the The Senior Natural Heritage Officer suggestions regarding the Workplan Delivery.

5. Harlaw House – Café and Car Parking

The Convener gave a brief update on Harlaw House. He indicated that the property would again be put on the market.

Decision

The Senior Natural Heritage Officer to send an update to the Convener if there were any developments.

6. Friends of the Pentlands

The Joint Committee noted with regret the passing John Stirling of the Friends of the Pentlands.

7. Dates for Future Meetings

PHRP Consultation Forum – To be confirmed.

PHRP Joint Committee – 29 May 2020

Appendix

To note that ELGBT was not a non-voting member of the Joint Committee.