



ASSOCIATION OF NORTHERN TRAILS SCOTLAND (ANTS)
Friends of John o' Groats Trail, Friends of the North Coast Trail
TRUSTEES ANNUAL REPORT 2025
SC049061

Chair Report- Jay Wilson

Spring is here, which means it's time to get out walking, and soon also time to cut bracken! It also means it's AGM time. This AGM marks ten years since the charity was founded in 2016. We will continue to celebrate our tenth anniversary through the rest of the year. We plan to have a celebration event sometime this year, and we would appreciate donations to a special fund for this event, as well as any volunteers to help us organise it!

The past year has been one of steady progress. After building the 22 metre long Loth Burn Bridge last April, this past year has been a bit more low key. Laura has been working alone for most of the past year, hard at work on the North Coast Trail as well as the John o' Groats Trail. A lot of the North Coast Trail has been marked as far west as Melvich, but there's still much marking and infrastructure to be completed. Our system of work packages on the John o' Groats Trail has been a success, allowing us to give contractors good-size chunks of work that, when complete, should mean that section of trail is at a higher standard for years to come.

All the hard work is paying off as trail walkers now often report the John o' Groats Trail isn't as hard as they thought it would be! And given it's just as beautiful as it always was, it is appealing to many many more walkers. The people counter installed when we built the Loth Bridge has recorded 1256 people in the past year (May-December 2025), a new record number for the trail.

In the past year, we received funding that will allow us to add an employee to finally help Laura manage and develop more than 300 miles of trails. These are exciting times for the organisation.

Thank you so much for your support. Our membership has grown considerably since we took on our first full time employee in 2022. Our members are the foundation of our charity. Please continue to support us in any and every way possible. You are always welcome to contact us, make suggestions, and meet with us.

When I said above that Laura has been working alone, of course that's not true. The volunteers and trustees have rallied round and done a great deal to help. I feel more than ever that we are a family here at ANTS, and I'm really proud to be a part of that family.

On a personal note, as many of you know, the trail and this charity have become a huge part of my life since I first walked from Inverness to John o' Groats back in 2014. While it will always be

thus, I have started to think about stepping down as chair. I have a goal of stepping down by the next AGM in 2027. It will be healthy for the organisation to find new leadership, and it will be good for me to be able to start new projects. Please help us search for new trustees and especially a new chair.

Trail Development Manager Report- Laura Gray

2025 has been a slightly different year on the trails, most notably the uncharacteristically warm (and dry!) weather we experienced from about April to late September, but also a change of pace going from two full time employees to only one. As a result, we approached infrastructure improvements in a slightly different manner, trying to be more pro-active than reactive and creating larger packages of work in select locations on the John o'Groats Trail in the hopes of improving the walking experience across a whole stage. As the JOGT continues to grow in popularity year on year (1384 people walked the whole trail in 2025!), we turned some of our focus onto the charity's governance. Our Trustee, Ron McCraw, supported by the rest of the board and myself, has spearheaded these efforts to ensure our risk management strategy fully aligns with the trail's current status and our plans for the years ahead. Diana Rutowski, treasurer, also took on a large amount of the day to day running of the accounts which has helped streamline our accounts process in house. We held more frequent in person informal meetings with the board and some members of the community, which has allowed for good brain storming of ideas and problem solving. I would like to thank Dounreay Socio-Economic Fund and Stroupster Wind Farm for allowing us to continue employing a trail development manager, which in turn ensures continued development of the trails.

2025 saw many exciting projects (to name just a few!):

- Construction of The Rob and Caroline Pickard Bridge (22m span bridge across Loth Burn) in April and the unveiling of the plaque with Caroline Pickard in a very snowy November (*The Big Give, People's Postcode Lottery, NHI, Gordon and Ena Baxter Fund, Kilbraur Wind Farm, SSE Gordon Bush and SSE Sustainable Development*)
- Completion of Strimming 2025 under budget despite the constant battle of keeping back the vegetation with the warm weather. With great thanks to our contractors and our fantastic volunteers. (*Camster Wind Farm Community Fund and CVG Caithness Community Fund*)
- Continuing to mark the North Coast Trail and work with landowners along the route, especially in the western section with help from our volunteers and BAM- many hands make light work!
- Completion of one of our first larger packages of work at Freswick, which included moving in 3 sections of fencing, construction of several walkways and the addition of 4 stiles to improve access in what was locally known as a precarious section of the trail! (*NHI*)
- Joining forces with Sinclair Bay Trust and landowners Douglas and Scott Webster at Keiss Castle to create a safer route in an area popular with both locals and tourists alike. With safety concerns and livestock, there were a few issues to work through but a fantastic solution was agreed upon by all parties. There is now a super fenced pathway

to and from the castle, along with a viewpoint, which should allow everyone to access this specular ruin safely. (*Sinclair Bay Trust/SSEN*)

- With gracious permission of the landowners we moved in two separate fencelines in the Forse area, which has greatly improved the walking experience (*People's Postcode Lottery and Community Regeneration Fund*)
- The completion of one of our larger packages of work to date in the latter part of the year, between Lybster and Whaligoe, has included the installation of almost too many bridges and walkways to count, multiple stiles and replacement of some older infrastructure. At Occumster we refurbished one of our oldest bridges and hope it will carry many feet over it for more years to come! (*CVG Halarsy and Camster Windfarm*)
- Jay and Ron, got in touch with their creative side and assisted Room8 with the production of our new promotional film for the John o'Groats Trail. We cannot wait to show you! We also had a new logo for the JOGT designed by local Artist Tamara Hicks, so watch this space for some new merchandise! (*Camster Wind Farm Community Fund*)
- Jay continues to work on the creation of a walking link between the Moray Coast Trail and the John o'Groats Trail between Nairn and Inverness. (*Haventus Arderseir*)
- The designing and printing of information panels by Fin Macrae at DUFI Art in Tain for the John o'Groats Trail, hopefully we will be rolling these out in 2026 spring/summer (*Lybster and Tannach Education Fund*)
- Along with our volunteers we explored options for getting the trail off the road in areas in the black isle

Looking to the future in 2026:

- We have secured funding for a large majority of our strimming for 2026, through a combination of grants and donations from local businesses
- Work has already started for the year ahead, with continuing the improvements north of Keiss under construction and hopefully south of the Lybster area
- Employment of an additional colleague with a focus on developing paths in the community of Halkirk due to start at the end of April
- Summer 2026 should bring the employment of someone with focus on the North Coast Trail again, with attention to the Melvich area.
- Celebrations for the 10 year anniversary of the John o'Groats Trail

We have an exciting time on the trail with new employees on the horizon which will help broaden our capacity meaning we can undertake more developments and improvements in a timely manner. We also hope to explore ways we can become less reliant on grant funding. Having more informal meetings with the board and members of the community has been really helpful in 2025 and we hope to roll this out more in 2026.

With Thanks

As Jay always says, our biggest volunteers are our Landowners, whom without their gracious permission, we would not be able to carry out any of the work we do. I am always grateful for the time they spend with us whether it be to discuss improvements, solve a problem or help with access.

All of our fantastic volunteers, who give up their time to make the trail a more enjoyable and safe experience for walkers, giving countless hours each year whether it be to check the trail condition, vegetation control or building infrastructure.

To our board and members, some of whom have been with us from the early days, your ongoing support and dedication to the development of the trails has got us to where ANTS is today, here's to the next 10!

To our funders, who allow us the ability to carry out the improvements you see on the trail, improving the walking experience year on year. We have built good relations with many of the funders who continue to support both the trails and see the benefit they will bring to local communities.

Treasurers Report- Diana Rutowski

Income

2025 was a great year for income, with £130.6k in grants. This is a decrease of £46.3k when compared to last year £176.9k 2024, however 2024 was an outlier due to the grants (approx. £90k) received in relation to Loth Burn Bridge.

This great result is due to the huge efforts of Laura, Jay and Ken in applying and successfully obtaining these grants. We have included a 2nd page of the accounts which gives a breakdown of grant income along with an overview of the projects they are supporting.

Our Donations and Memberships were also very strong at £26.4k in 2025, due largely to two extremely generous £10k donations received, this is a significant increase from £4.7k in 2024.

Expenditure

There are two main areas of expenditure:

Contractors Materials & Equipment £125.7k. The majority of this spend (approx. £90k) went towards the construction of the Loth Burn Bridge; a key highlight in the development of the JoGT with our first major piece of infrastructure completed. The balance of this spend went towards trail maintenance and infrastructure, which continues to be a vital part of supporting and improving trail quality.

Trail Managers £54.7 Due to a funding gap we unfortunately reverted to having only one full time trail manager for most of the year. *(The great news is that it looks like we will have funding for at least two full time Trail managers in 2026)*. Laura did an amazing job driving forward trail development and maintenance, income generation, and community engagement - amongst other work.

The closing bank balance of £88.6k leaves the charity in a strong position to begin 2026.

A handwritten signature in black ink, enclosed within a yellow rectangular border. The signature is written in a cursive style and appears to read "Jay Wilson".

Signed on behalf of the trustees by
Jay Wilson, chair of trustees

Date: 19.08.26