



ASSOCIATION OF NORTHERN TRAILS SCOTLAND (ANTS)
Friends of John o' Groats Trail, Friends of the North Coast Trail
TRUSTEES ANNUAL REPORT 2024
SC049061

Chair's Report- Jay Wilson

I don't usually start with a quote by Lenin, but this one feels right: "There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen."

It's hard to believe that just a year ago, the Loth Burn Bridge was still just a dream, and so was the North Coast Trail. Now, over the last few weeks, the bridge is completed, and the marking of the new trail has begun. The railway bridge at the Loth Burn was completed sometime around 1870. The first road bridge nearby, probably around the same time, over 150 years ago. And now in 2025 we have a bridge for coastal walkers. Decades in a few weeks.

One of the most notable developments in the last year has been the establishment of a brand new trail – the North Coast Trail. This has been a dream of the organisation for several years, and the brainchild of our own [REDACTED], who has been a long-standing advocate of making the northern edge of Scotland walkable.

Doubling our trails meant doubling the workforce – meaning that we now have two employees! [REDACTED] started in June 2024 to lead on the development of the North Coast Trail, and to work on the John o' Groats Trail alongside [REDACTED]. But you would have thought that [REDACTED] had been a trail developer all her life: her energy, people skills, and project management skills have shone through, and [REDACTED] has been able to make great headway with the North Coast Trail – organising community consultations; liaising with and assuaging landowners; surveying the trail with [REDACTED]; submitting funding applications; doing the social media; designing a website for the NCT; creating GPX files and routes for WalkHighlands. All of this, whilst project managing the installation of ANTS' biggest piece of infrastructure yet – a 22m bridge which spans the Loth Burn! This bridge is due to be opened on April 24th 2025 – and marks a milestone moment for ANTS.

Alongside [REDACTED] has been able to build upon his success in obtaining funding for the day-to-day running of the Trail – most notably the aforementioned Loth Burn Bridge, at a total cost of £90,000. A further £86,000 was raised throughout 2024 for a variety of projects – mostly geared towards both Trail Development Manager positions and strimming and infrastructure works. We are grateful for [REDACTED] hard work in all of this, and indeed in all the progress he has made throughout the year: plenty of infrastructure works and strimming, alongside some great community events too. [REDACTED] has really got stuck in in strimming and recently also mattocking, putting his natural athleticism to good use. He has also maintained good relations with a huge number of landowners along the JoGT.

The last year has also seen another new worker, [REDACTED], come onto the scene as a consultant, helping us with mapping, surveying of the north coast, and has also lent his expertise in “benching” (leveling the trail to make it easier to walk). [REDACTED] expertise is helping us reach a new standard of trail development.

Of course we must offer thanks to our hard-working - or is that long-suffering? – trustees. In particular I would like to thank [REDACTED], who is standing down as a trustee after four years. His hard work, insight, pragmatism, and wit has been invaluable for the trail, for the organisation, and for myself. [REDACTED] was recently involved in the development of our amazing new resource, the John o’ Groats Trail Management Map, a ‘one stop shop’ for all things infrastructure/landowner/vegetation related. This is so useful in identifying what to ‘hit next’ on the Trail. [REDACTED] will remain a supporter of the trail and will continue to serve as a Trail Warden for the Brora to Helmsdale section.

[REDACTED], stepping down as Treasurer, has also played a huge role in re-shaping and improving the organisation. [REDACTED] took on the unenviable role of initiating the reorganisation of the online filing system and the accounts, to ensure that ANTS is more efficient and well-maintained. This was a Herculean task, but [REDACTED] inspired myself and staff to carry this through to completion.

Several new trustees joined in the past year, including [REDACTED], a crofter who lives in Keiss, and has taken on our Safeguarding Officer role, which we are hugely thankful for. We are particularly pleased to welcome [REDACTED] who offers a crofting landowner’s perspective on trail development.

We also welcomed [REDACTED], a retired veterinarian. Originally from Aberdeen, he has spent most of his life working in Caithness with both small (pets) and large (farm) animals. [REDACTED] walked the Trail in 2024 in aid of AlzheimerScotland, a most commendable achievement (especially when you consider that he walked additional miles up the Fyrish Monument and Ben Bhraggie!), and raised almost £40,000 for the charity. Having the support of [REDACTED] is, in my opinion, a real coup for the Trail, and we are delighted to have him on board. [REDACTED] is that rare trustee who serves as a bridge between the walking and farming communities.

[REDACTED] was also introduced to the trustee team in late 2024 – after serving as a volunteer ‘Trail Warden’ since 2022. An accountant by profession, she has (hopefully) stepped into the role of Treasurer, taking over from [REDACTED]. This is an important task, so we are so thankful to have her support.

Finally, in early 2025 we welcomed [REDACTED] into the team. Some of you may recognise [REDACTED] name – he surveyed the trail in the summer of 2022, forming the basis of our next steps. It is fantastic to have someone so versed in trail development, and his knowledge and experience will be invaluable going forward.

Notably, trail use continued to grow last year, with numbers of long distance walkers increasing about 40% over the previous year. And for the first time, we took a stab at estimating the economic contribution of the John o’ Groat Trail, and we were shocked to see that a reasonable estimate is about £1 million per annum!

And so, it gives me great pride as the AGM approaches, to say that the trails, and our charity, have never been stronger nor better served. We look forward to another great year.

Trail Development Manager Report-

Hello to everyone - I'm [REDACTED], a Trail (no longer 'the'!) Development Manager with the Association of Northern Trails Scotland (ANTS). That's me on the right there, looking very serious and proudly wearing my John o' Groats Trail Stacks o' Puffins tee by [REDACTED] of the Coo's Tail Gallery in Thurso. You can get yourself one from our online shop, by the way!

So - where has the time gone? It doesn't seem like almost a year has passed since the last AGM in May. But the rest of 2024 saw the completion of my 2-year contract with the Association of Northern Trails Scotland.

I began in September 2022, in a position funded by SSE Caithness Partnership, SSE Beatrice Community Fund, the Caithness North Sutherland Fund, and a private donation from [REDACTED] in memory Rob Pickard, and finished in September 2024.

With funding acquired through the year from and the RWE Bad a Cheo Fund, The Foyle Foundation, The People's Postcode Lottery, and utilising an underspend from CNSF/SSE funds, I have been able to continue working for ANTS - from October 2024, through at least May 2025.

Since May last year, we've seen a huge new development for the Trail - with the establishment of a new trail for the north: The North Coast Trail! This trail, which will stretch for 150 miles along the top of Scotland, from John o' Groats to Cape Wrath, was the brainchild of [REDACTED] (*pictured left, with new development manager [REDACTED]*), who has long helped the Association of Northern Trails Scotland, and we are indebted to him for the work he has put into developing this route over the years.

The development of a new Trail has also meant that ANTS have a new employee, and I have a colleague: [REDACTED]! This has been a big step forward for the organisation, and it has been a pleasure to welcome [REDACTED] to the team. She has showcased her natural abilities in leadership and project management in taking on this trail, and has made fantastic progress in the development of the North Coast Trail.

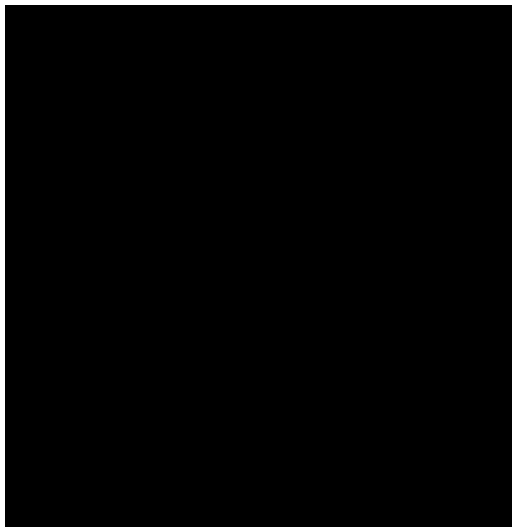
Indeed, it has been an interesting exercise in understanding how to develop a trail: we have learned from the past and tried to ensure that the new trail is “for the community, by the community”, involving them at every stage, welcoming feedback, questions, suggestions. We want a route which is as beneficial as possible to as many people as possible. Here’s to developing the next sections of the trail, from Melvich to Cape Wrath.

In terms of physical improvements to the John o’ Groats Trail, we’ve seen:

- 4 new stiles at Clyth
- 2 stile repairs in the Sinclair’s Bay area in May
- 1 new stile at Sinclair Girnigoe in June
- Completion of Whaligoe staircase in July
- Construction of Skirza bridge in July
- Completion of 2 x Rockhead stiles in June/July
- 1 new stile at Freswick in July
- 4 stiles at Occumster in August/September
- £11,000 of strimming between May and September.
- A new walkway in Latheronwheel in October
- A bridge across Culgower Burn in October
- 1 new stile and stile repair in Ackergill in December
- New fencing and improved access at Whaligoe in January
- A new walkway at Castle of Old Wick in February
- A new bridge at Bruan in March, with volunteers from Vulcan
- And of course, our biggest project to date - a bridge over Loth Burn, due to be completed by the time our AGM is held!



Above: *The new bridge at Culgower, with JOGT volunteers*



We give huge thanks to all the landowners for allowing works to take place on their land, and ensuring safer walking conditions for those on the Trail. We'd also like to extend a 'thank you' to our contractors: [REDACTED] y [REDACTED] (Far North Fencing), [REDACTED] (E Sutherland Construction Services) and [REDACTED] (*pictured left*). [REDACTED] is now moving to Mexico with his family, and so we wish him all the very best in his new adventures. Hasta la vista, [REDACTED]

There's more work in the pipeline for the John o' Groats Trail for the 2025, with work 'packages' having been cobbled together - with Forse Steps due to be completed very soon, and fencing works to take place nearby also, thanks to funding from the Highland Council's Community Regeneration Fund.

Assisting this in this matter is [REDACTED] - who some of you may remember was responsible for the Trail survey in 2022 - and brings to the team a wealth of experience in trail development.

It is fantastic to have a pragmatic and forward-thinking individual on the team to help give guidance and direction in our efforts.

Also joining us is [REDACTED], who is taking over from [REDACTED] as treasurer. [REDACTED] put in a truly gigantic shift in overseeing our accounts, and at the same time pushed us to 'clean up' our file system, a job which was long overdue. We thank [REDACTED] for his hard work and patience in all of this - an organisation which has its admin in check is surely bound for success!

Brian was also responsible, alongside long-standing trustee [REDACTED] (who is sadly stepping down this year!) for developing our new 'John o' Groats Trail Management Map', which rolls together our required works, existing assets, vegetation control and landowner demarcation - all in one! This is an incredibly useful asset, providing 'at a glance' and in-depth information on the state of our trail. I would like to thank [REDACTED] (and [REDACTED]) for their hard work here - this is such a positive step forward for the Trail.

Other developments include:

- £22,500 acquired towards trail infrastructure and strimming in 2025
- £5,000 acquired towards a promotional video / photography / logo designs
- Outreach sessions with Dunbeath Primary School, Wick and Farr High Schools
- Volunteer events at Latheronwheel, Whaligoe, Dunnet Head and 2 x events at Bruan
- Supporting [REDACTED] on his 'Walk for Moira', and acquiring [REDACTED] services as a new trustee!
- Assisting and obtaining the assistance of 9 Spanish Scouts on the Trail, helping us to apply non-slip strips across numerous pieces of infrastructure
- Dozens of letters of support acquired towards various projects
- The beginning of the development of a trail linking the Moray Way to the John o' Groats Trail
- Several appearances on various news and media outlets, including 'Walk', the Ramblers official magazine, the BBC, The Scotsman,



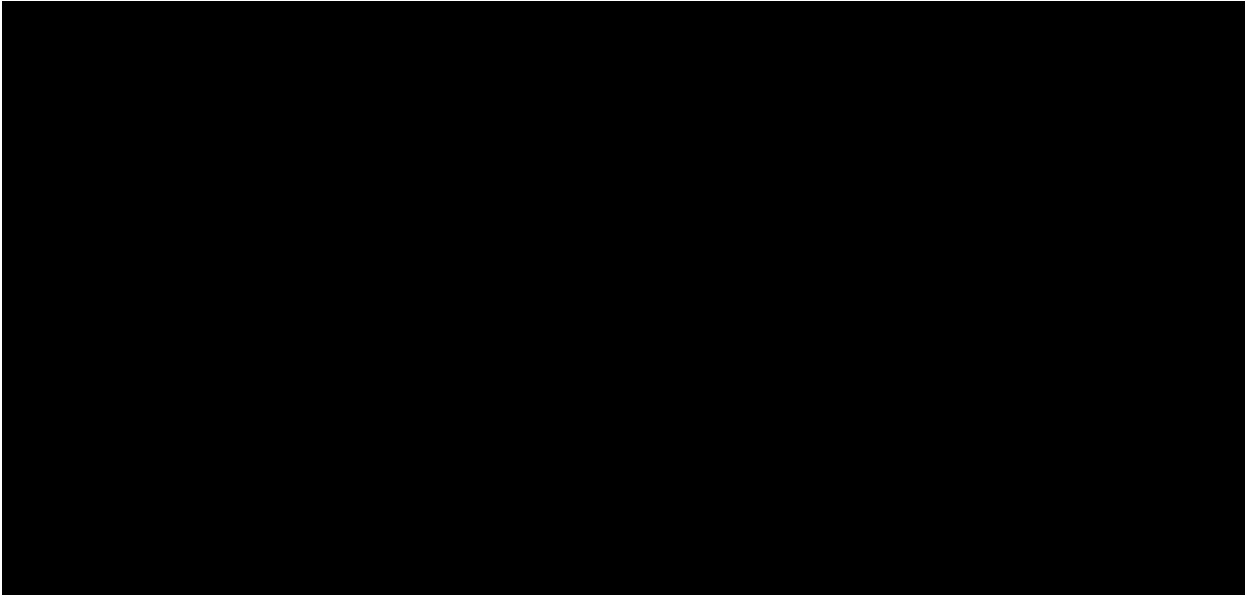
Above: A full splash in *The Scotsman* (left), and an appearance in a new Bradt booklet on the North Highlands for the John o' Groats Trail (right)

In general, many positive steps forward for the Trail. For me, it's important that we keep on track and continue to build relationships in the community as well as building and developing the Trail. The two go hand-in-hand - a more supportive community means that we can develop the trail with more ease.

Trail development, though, is a slow process, with plenty of challenges ahead, and 2025 is shaping up to be another busy year. But we all know about the benefits of walking, and the Trail has such huge potential to improve and change lives. Sometimes we might not realise that walking is good for the economy too: we recently estimated that the Trail is worth around £1 million to the local economy - so, with the support of our members, our followers and our trustees, I think ANTS are on the path to success!

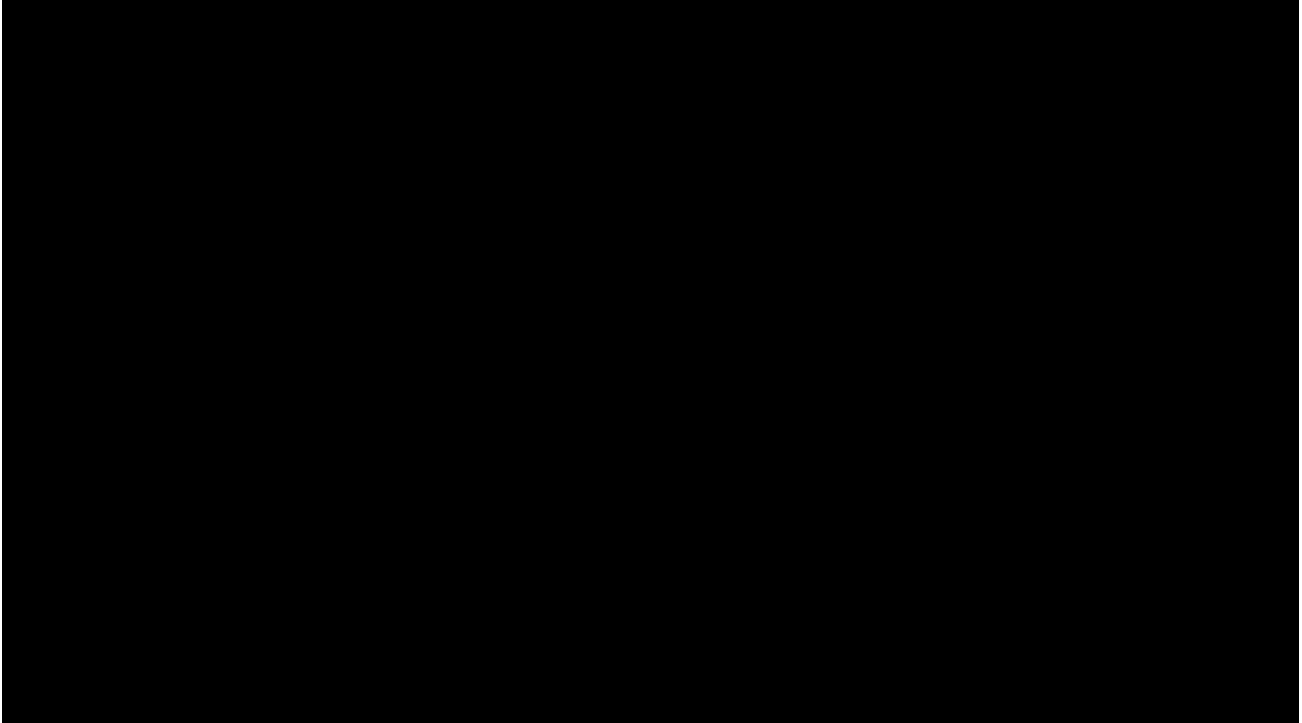
Trail Development Manager Report - North Coast Trail/Laura Gray

Last year marked an important and exciting time in ANTS history, as not only did we decide to take on another long distance trail, the North Coast Trail (NCT), but also another employee to oversee its development. After taking a complete career 180, I joined the organisation in June armed with the communication and organisation skills gained from the many hats I wore over my decade long career as a Registered Veterinary Nurse- who knew there would be so many transferable skills!



Above: Left, attending a JOGT as a volunteer in Spring 2024 to, Right, employed as a trail development manager leading a volunteer session at Bruan Winter 2025 with Vulcan

With a quick introduction to Strimming the JOGT 101 from [REDACTED] before he shot off to Alaska, a whole new coastline in Caithness to explore, and a community to engage with, it was a busy summer! I was guided along the North Coast of Caithness over the summer months by none other than our own in-house expert [REDACTED], who graciously shared his endless valuable knowledge and experiences of walking the coast. The community outreach for the development of the NCT was a particular highlight of the year, over my first few months I became acquainted with the various village halls across the county and learned how to quickly assemble and unassemble a gazebo while fighting the Caithness wind at various shows and games over the season. The support for the project was overwhelming, 94% of attendees sharing positive and constructive suggestions, with local communities and groups sharing their tales and knowledge of the coastline, many of whom had already walked the John o'Groats Trail and were keen to see an 'extension' happen.



Above: *Left, Chatting over a map at a community consultation in Dunnet. Right, Introducing [REDACTED] to a weary walker at the Mey Games.*

We also had some Scouts from Catalonia join us in July to walk the Caithness section of the JOGT while also carrying out some maintenance on their way, this including some good old bracken bashing and securing non-slip treads to current infrastructure to improve accessibility.

"We wanted to do volunteering to give more meaning to our stay, with you we felt that and in addition we felt like you were helping us more than the other way around. We are so grateful for how all of the John O'Groats staff have treated us, for all the things you did for us making our hiking so much enjoyable and comfortable. Apart from the amazing landscape we also met wonderful people and had some laughs on the way. In conclusion thanks to you, our trip was so much better and fun and for sure we will recommend this volunteering to everyone"

And just like that summer was almost over, but not before [REDACTED] joined us for just over 4 weeks to help carry out a survey of the north coast and ultimately create a route. We walked the north coast in every which way, and some locations multiple times, so we could get a good feel for what could be a possible routes. On many occasions this was very much like the children's book 'We Are Going on a Bear Hunt' :

"We can't go over it. We can't go under it. Oh no! We've got to go through it!"

[REDACTED], *We Are Going On A Bear Hunt*, 1989. But also [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] of ANTS scrambling through Gorse, September 2024.

Following [REDACTED] visit he produced an 'ideal' route, along with a map of suggested improvements we could make to improve accessibility supported by a document of key findings and alternative routes. From this I was able to collate his information along with my own notes,

to start to form infrastructure lists and another (!!) strimming/vegetation control list. I have also focused some efforts on securing some funding to start to implement these developments, notably the Caithness Voluntary Group Halsary Fund- Caithness Community Fund for hopefully £7.5k which will be a good 'starter pack' for trail improvements.

Below: [REDACTED] on day one of the survey.

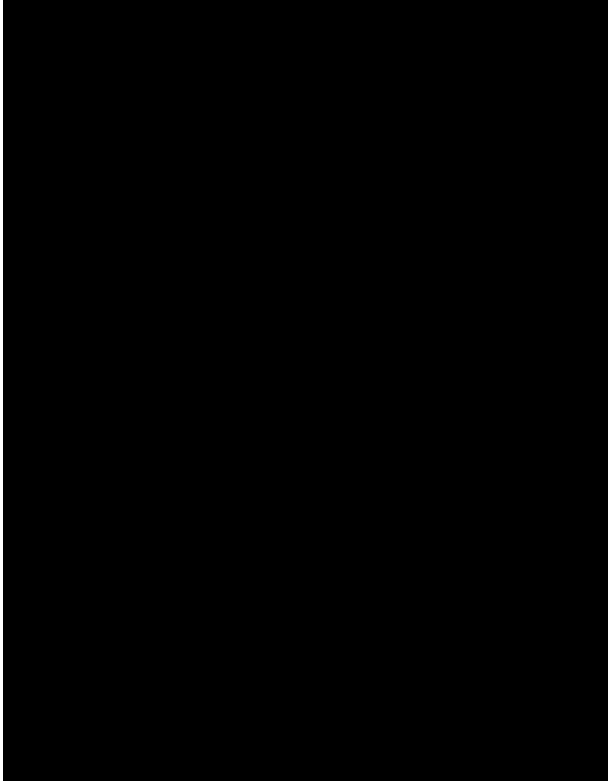
[REDACTED]

At the end of September, I also hosted my first guided walk at Holburn Head as part of the Climate Hub Festival. The event was attended by a few well known locals as well as a family who were visiting the area on holiday. This was a super collaborative effort, seeing us cycle from Thurso out to Scrabster led by [REDACTED] of Cycling UK and [REDACTED] from Plant Life helping us identify some exciting flora and fauna along the walk.

I am well into the process of creating a landowner list- identifying, meeting and working with landowners. With [REDACTED] route and survey as a basis, this has allowed us to have informed discussions so we can reach an agreed route to pass through their land. As a

result, some areas of the trail started to look slightly different to the proposed route, but this is the organic live nature of any walking route. The majority of the engagement with landowners is positive, with justifiable concerns, but they have been open to discussion and have offered up solutions- I think the pre-existing development of the JOGT has helped this. I also worked alongside some local community councils, to share our plans for the route and garner some support for the project locally. [REDACTED] and I both feel passionately about the importance of community involvement in both these projects, and are keen to continue to involve local groups early in the trail development.

In winter, along with the help of some keen volunteers I started to waymark the route in sections that could be easily walked- hopefully everyone locally has started to see some of our teal markers pop up along the coastline. These events have also helped kick start the volunteer list for the NCT. I am hopeful that we will have the Caithness section of the NCT marked for Spring/Summer. While marking, I have been making a start to writing route descriptions to accompany GPX files of the route so we can start to publicise on the likes of WalkHighlands.



Above: *Left, some new faces volunteering on the NCT at Dunnet Head. Right, A NCT way marker with the Peedie Sands in the background*

I have assisted [REDACTED] in some tasks along the JOGT, such as organising a volunteer day with some Vulcan employees at [REDACTED] to install a bridge with [REDACTED] guidance, providing some extra hands with the building of Culgower Bridge, and project managing the installation of Loth Bridge- Brunel who?! [REDACTED] has shown me the ropes of funding applications, and I have submitted some applications on behalf of the JOGT for some minor infrastructure improvements, including securing £1,360 from Lybster and Tannach to install some information panels along the trail.

Following [REDACTED] securing £90k for the Loth Bridge, ANTS embarked on its biggest infrastructure project to date. I worked with [REDACTED] of Arvika Consult to put the project out to tender. Following a successful tender bid from CRC, the contract was signed and the funds lined up, we saw the construction begin in early March and complete on the last day of the month! The ANTS team has been working relentlessly behind the scenes, prior to the project even getting off the ground, from initial conversations with [REDACTED] several years ago, to [REDACTED] working hard to fundraise, I have really come to the project half way through the party!

The hard work has really just begun for the NCT, and I hope it will soon be following in the footsteps of the success of the JOGT. We have a truly fantastic team at ANTS, with everyone contributing different skill sets and experiences- there is always someone keen to offer advice and guidance. There have been some fabulous new additions to the board in the past year who will compliment the team greatly, and I am looking forward to working with them. I would also

like to give a special thanks to [REDACTED], who has been a great guide to the world of Trail Development, and has offered endless amounts of wisdom. His passion for promoting the north of Scotland and the benefit trails can bring to the community is inspiring. Our volunteers, however, are the true stars of the show, giving us their time to help make improvements on the trail, even helping to boost our profile locally or being on hand to happily answer my various questions in the early days when I was still getting familiar with the JOGT- Thank you to each and every one of you!



Signed on behalf of the trustees by
[REDACTED], chair of trustees

Date: 06.08.25

**FRIENDS OF THE JOHN O'GROATS TRAIL
ASSOCIATION OF NORTHERN TRAILS SCOTLAND**

SC049061 2019 mid year to date

SC046737 2016-2019 (mid-year transition to SCIO)

INCOME AND EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT YEAR ENDED 31/12/2024

	<u>2024</u>	<u>2023</u>
<u>INCOME</u>		
Grants See attached for breakdown	176,910.67	83,370.62
Donations & Memberships	4,728.72	12,263.83
Guide Books	1,394.18	970.45
Miscellaneous	363.81	157.97
TOTAL	<u>183,397.38</u>	<u>96,762.87</u>
<u>EXPENDITURE</u>		
Advertising	0.00	80.00
Committee & AGM	0.00	40.00
Contractors Materials & Equipment	34,568.28	18,847.60
Insurance	496.47	301.45
Guide Books	847.50	0.00
Planning Development & Fundraising	0.00	35,494.15
Office Expenses	1,366.70	297.42
Trail Manager	53,514.28	32,494.45
Misc	164.89	20.00
TOTAL	<u>90,958.12</u>	<u>87,575.07</u>
<u>NET OPENING BANK BALANCE</u>	34,960.98	25,773.18
Add Income	<u>183,397.38</u>	<u>96,762.87</u>
	218,358.36	122,536.05
Less Expenditure	<u>90,958.12</u>	<u>87,575.07</u>
<u>NET CLOSING BANK BALANCE</u>	<u>127,400.24</u>	<u>34,960.98</u>
of which		
Restricted	110,037.58	19,981.37
Unrestricted	<u>17,362.66</u>	<u>14,979.61</u>
	<u>127,400.24</u>	<u>34,960.98</u>

Prepared By

Dated

7/2/2025

Audited By

Dated

12/3/2025

**FRIENDS OF THE JOHN O'GROATS TRAIL
ASSOCIATION OF NORTHERN TRAILS SCOTLAND**

SC049061 2019 mid year to date

SC046737 2016-2019 (mid-year transition to SCIO)

INCOME AND EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT YEAR ENDED 31/12/2024

2024

INCOME

Grants Received from

North Highlands & ClimateAct Fund
Caithness & North Sutherland Fund
Foundation Scotland
Scottish Power Latheron Lybster & Clyth Halsary
Highland Council
The Big Give Trust
North Highland Initiative
Peoples Postcode Trust
Peoples Postcode Trust
The Big Give Trust
Foundation Scotland
Thistle Wind Partners
Halsary Caithness Community Fund
Foundation Scotland Bad a Cheo
Foundation Scotland Camster
The Foyle Foundation
CNSF/Beatrice Claim
SSE Renewables
Beatrice OffShore
SSE Renewables
North Highland Initiative
The Highland Council

Supporting

Anti-slip grips for stiles bridges & walkways 500.00
Trail Development Manager 8,274.29
Strimming in Caithness 2,944.00
Strimming and Infrastructure 5,000.00
Business Plan & Map Work 6,772.00
Loth Burn Bridge 2,771.49
Infrastructure 5,000.00
Loth Burn Bridge 10,000.00
Trail Development Manager 4,000.00
Loth Burn 2,500.00
2nd Trail Development Manager 20,000.00
Infrastructure 1,000.00
Infrastructure 7,500.00
Trail Development Manager 4,000.00
Infrastructure 19,966.00
Trail Development Manager 7,500.00
Trail Development Manager 5,466.89
Loth Burn Bridge 16,000.00
Trail Development Manager 15,000.00
Loth Burn Bridge 20,000.00
Loth Burn Bridge 5,000.00
2nd Trail Development Manager 7,716.00

Total Received

£176,910.67

OSCr

Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator

		Independent examiner's report on the accounts v2					
Report to the trustees/members of	Charity name	ASSOCIATION OF NORTHERN TRAILS SCOTLAND					
	Registered charity number	SC049061					
On the accounts of the charity for the period	Period start date				Period end date		
	Day	Month	Year	to	Day	Month	Year
	01	01	2024		31	12	2024
Set out on pages							(remember to include the page numbers of additional sheets)
Respective responsibilities of trustees and examiner	The charity's trustees are responsible for the preparation of the accounts in accordance with the terms of the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) 2005 Act and the Charities Accounts (Scotland) Regulations 2006. The charity trustees consider that the audit requirement of Regulation 10(1) (d) of the Accounts Regulations does not apply. It is my responsibility to examine the accounts as required under section 44(1) (c) of the Act and to state whether particular matters have come to my attention.						
Basis of independent examiner's statement	My examination is carried out in accordance with Regulation 11 of the Charities Accounts (Scotland) Regulations 2006. An examination includes a review of the accounting records kept by the charity and a comparison of the accounts presented with those records. It also includes consideration of any unusual items or disclosures in the accounts and seeks explanations from the trustees concerning any such matters. The procedures undertaken do not provide all the evidence that would be required in an audit and, consequently, I do not express an audit opinion on the accounts.						
Independent examiner's statement	In the course of my examination, no matter has come to my attention other than that disclosed on the attached page* - which gives me reasonable cause to believe that in any material respect the requirements: - to keep accounting records in accordance with section 44(1) (a) of the 2005 Act and Regulation 4 of the 2006 Accounts Regulations, and - to prepare accounts which accord with the accounting records and comply with Regulation 9 of the 2006 Accounts Regulations have not been met, or - to which, in my opinion, attention should be drawn in order to enable a proper understanding of the accounts to be reached.						
Signed:	[Redacted Signature]			Date:	12/03/2025		
Name:							
Relevant professional qualification(s) or body (if any):							
Address:	CATHNESS VOLUNTARY GROUP THE ARCADE SUITE PULTENEY CENTRE, HADDART STREET WICK KW1 5BA						

*Please delete the words in the brackets if they do not apply. If the words do apply, set out those matters which have come to your attention on the following page.

APPENDIX 3

Disclosure section

Only complete if the examiner needs to highlight material problems.

Give here brief details of
any items that the
examiner wishes to
disclose