

# National Park Authority Board Meeting

Agenda Item 9



## Rural Development Update

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*Paper for information*

### 1. Purpose

- 1.1 This report provides a summary update on progress towards achieving Rural Development objectives and recent highlights (and lowlights, if any) since the last report to the Board.

### 2. Highlights

- 2.1 Completion of the 2013/2014 Planning Performance Framework is currently underway.
- 2.2 Statistics on speed of decision making for planning applications shows improvements from 2012/2013 in the recently published 2013/2014 annual statistics.
- 2.3 Excellent performance figures for both EIA applications and Electricity Generation applications for 2013/2014 re-affirm the prioritisation we gave to large number of hydro cases submitted in that period.
- 2.4 Agreement with both Argyll & the Islands and Forth Valley & Lomond LEADER LAGS on a 'National Park Joint sub-LAG' and associated arrangements.
- 2.5 A successful LIVE Park consultation on our Main Issues Report, utilising a whole new range of communication and engagement techniques.

### 3. Lowlights:

- 3.1 The published annual statistics evidence a downturn in the average time taken to determine applications subject to Legal Agreements.

### 4. National Park Partnership Plan outcome:

- 4.1 In the National Park businesses and communities thrive and people live and work sustainably in a high quality environment.

### 5. Corporate Plan outcome:

- 5.1 A sustainable pattern of new developments meeting economic and community needs.
- 5.2 Active and empowered communities.

### 6. Development Management Progress:

#### **Planning Performance**

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- 6.1 At the time of writing, the team are in the process of concluding the preparation and submission of the 2013/14 Planning Performance Framework (PPF) report to Scottish Government, to a deadline of 30<sup>th</sup> Sept 2014.
- 6.2 Feedback on last year's report was overall very positive, confirming that the National Park Authority has demonstrated clear evidence of embracing the culture of performance and service quality envisaged through the PPF approach. This year's report has picked up on the identified 'key performance markers' such as an effective pre-application advice service, the use of processing agreements to manage the timeframe for determining applications and revised processes to improve the efficiency of applications subject to legal agreements. Work to secure improvements in these and other areas is ongoing and continues to be set out in the Service Improvement Plan for the year ahead, which is part of the PPF report.
- 6.3 In terms of statistics on speed of decision making for planning applications, quarterly data continues to be submitted to the SG statisticians to prepare performance results for all Local Authorities and the two National Parks. The use of average determination times against a range of application types is now becoming well established as the key reporting indicator. Since the preparation of my last Board Update - and indeed the previous meeting of the Delivery Group – Scottish Government has published annual comparison statistics from 2012/13 to 2013/14. Our performance will be separately reported to the Delivery Group in more detail but the key highlights to note for the National Park are as follows:
- Improvements in the average determination time are evidenced for the majority of categories of 'development type' including 'householder' applications, 'Listed Building consents' and all other 'local applications'. In many categories the determination time is slightly above the Scottish average - for example for 2013/14 'householder' applications in the National Park were determined in an average of 8.2 weeks, whereas the Scottish average is 7.7 weeks. Nevertheless, securing the year on year improvement is considered to be the more significant target.
  - **The stand out statistic** for the National Park is that the determination of 'EIA applications' improved from 30.1 weeks in 2012/13 to 18.4 weeks in 2013/14. The Scottish average is 46.7 weeks. This evidences the work that has been undertaken jointly with the specialist advisors in the NP Conservation Team to secure a co-ordinated 'one team' approach to work on these complex applications. Also of note is that for the Q3 period in 2013 the National Park determined **one fifth of all EIA applications in Scotland** (run of river hydro cases).
  - Connected to the above is the figure for 'Electricity Generation' applications, average determination time in the National Park was 17 weeks for 2013/14. The

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Scottish average is 23.1 weeks. This includes run of river hydro applications of which 15 were determined in the period.

- An area which has not evidenced improvement is 'applications subject to Legal Agreements'. These averaged 72.3 weeks for 2013/14, down from 68.1 in the previous year. The Scottish average is 68.4. This is notable as it reflects badly on an area in which we are striving to improve performance. However, it has to be seen in the context of low overall numbers of cases which can mean a single protracted case distorts the average. In this instance there was such a case which was allowed to run rather than be returned to the Planning and Access Committee for reconsideration as there was a clear indication that a positive outcome could be secured. Discretion has to be able to be applied in such circumstance. In the case in question a significant financial contribution toward affordable housing was ultimately secured.
- The approval rate for all applications has fallen slightly to 96.6% in 2013/14 compared to 98.4% in 2012/13. However the National Park continues to consistently approve a higher proportion of applications than the Scottish average (94.1%). This is attributed to our ongoing commitment to engagement in pre-application discussions which have the combined effect of (a) deflecting non-starter proposals at an early stage and, (b) improving the quality of applications and proposals by negotiation. This approach enables us to make the most of our limited staff resource by avoiding contesting time consuming appeals following a refusal of planning permission.

6.4 In conclusion, the published statistics are particularly encouraging in light of the considerable pressure placed upon the DM team in prioritising a significant number of run of river hydro applications toward the close of 2013 and the knock on effect on other work which extended into the early part of 2014 and beyond.

### **Notable Casework**

- 6.5 Work on hydro development remains ongoing with 3 live hydro applications under consideration at this time and 2 others at pre-application / EIA screening stage. It is anticipated there may be another push by the renewable industry to secure consents to a deadline of 31st December 2014 in line with a further scheduled reduction in 'feed in tariffs' that may impact on the potential viability of schemes.
- 6.6 An application has been submitted for 18 residential units on a gap site within the Drymen settlement boundary and is proving locally contentious.

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6.7 A number of applications continue to be submitted for the renewal of permissions which were previously consented but on which development was unable to progress through the economic downturn. There is also a clear trend toward development commencing on site as evidence of a returning confidence in the construction industry – examples being the mixed use development at the riverside in Balloch (residential and retail), the Marston’s restaurant and 20 bed hotel in Balloch (adjacent to the entrance to Lomond Shores), a 14 unit residential scheme at the former Youth Hostel in Killin and a 7 unit holiday accommodation development at the Bridge of Lochay Hotel, also in Killin. These are reminders that the Development Management input does not conclude on the issue of permission but has an important role through the implementation phase, considering the discharge of planning conditions and undertaking on-site monitoring.

### **Service Delivery**

6.8 The PPF annual report submission, as highlighted earlier in this paper, is the key document for setting planning service improvement tasks for the year ahead. Officers in the DM team continue to work on updating and streamlining procedures around the consultation process with our internal specialist advisors (landscape, ecology, access etc). This is an important joint project between the DM and Conservation team, building upon the good practice which has been established through the ongoing pressured working on the run-of-river-hydro applications – and includes weekly priority setting meetings. The positive effect of this is referenced in the statistical analysis earlier in this report. Work is also progressing on updating the overarching internal procedure manual which confirms the process and responsibilities for the wide range of tasks which form part of the day to day operation of the DM service.

6.9 Our commitment to e-planning continues. There has been a steady increase in the number of applications submitted online over the preceding year, which has now levelled out around the 65 / 70% range. The Scottish average for applications submitted online for all local Authorities is currently around 49%, but this is anticipated to rise closer to the level which has become established at the National Park.

6.10 In partnership with the Conservation teams a project plan has been prepared to guide the delivery of this joint initiative to effectively manage, integrate, record and communicate specialist advice to planning applicants. Working initially with the Natural Heritage Team but ultimately rolling out to other specialist teams which provide input to the consideration of planning applications or pre-application advice – such as Access Officers. A short term working group has been set up.

6.11 The key objectives are:

- to provide an updated procedure for handling requests for advice and responses;

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- improve the mechanisms for logging or tracking internal consultations and agreed prioritisation of workloads;
- to ensure the preparation of best practice responses;
- to clarify the position around the sensitivity of information and on-line publication of responses.
- Currently draft procedures have been prepared but require finalisation and agreement at Executive level. Work is concurrently commencing on draft template responses.

### 7. Forward Planning Progress

- 7.1 There has been a very successful consultation campaign on LIVE Park for the Main Issues Report which ended in July. There is a separate Board Paper on this consultation.
- 7.2 The Rural Housing Enabler project is continuing well. Particular successes this year has been to bring together funding and an interested Housing Association to build 8 flats for rent in Kilmun – with construction hopefully starting this autumn – and advanced discussion regarding a development of 4 new homes in Luss.
- 7.3 Paths in the Park - The 2014-15 training programme is now in place with the first on site practical maintenance training taking place at St Fillans on the 20th September. This will be followed by a similar session in Arrochar in October, landowner permitting, and a visit to Oatridge path demonstration site in early 2015.
- 7.4 Luss Churchyard Hogback Stone - Luss & Arden Community Development Trust, with support from the National Park Authority, are seeking to undertake restoration of the stone along with interpretation information and training of volunteers to act as guides and to monitor the stone's condition.
- 7.5 This is a significant 11th Century monument as shown in the photos below and concern has been expressed that the stone has deteriorated in recent years with extensive biological growth obscuring the sculpted stone work. The outcome of grant applications is anticipated in autumn 2014, with the project to start in summer 2015.

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Hogback Stone 1926 – This photo (p.5) is taken from A D Lacaille's slide (Ecclesiastical Remains in the Neighbourhood of Luss, with notes on some unrecorded crosses and hog-backed Stones) and shows the north elevation of the hog-back.



Hogback Stone 2014 – This photo shows the current condition of the Stone (same elevation as above).

- 7.6 Community Action Plans - Arrochar & Tarbet, Strathfillan, Sandbank, and Balquhider, Lochearnhead & Strathyre, Gartmore, Lochgoil, Callander, Benmore & Kilmun, and Drymen are all complete. The following are all in progress - Balloch & Haldane is at design; Buchanan community consultation is complete; Kilmarnock and Strachur community consultations underway.
- 7.7 St Kessogs/Callander Summerfest – this has been a success with a growing attendance at events and visiting the displays over the course of the summer. Stirling Council is progressing its disposal of the building with a meeting of the community/Stirling Council/National Park steering group to review the offers to purchase the building.

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- 7.8 Skills Partnership - Business and candidate selection has now taken place for the People 1st Shared Apprenticeship pilot and two young people started their apprenticeship in June in Callander. Support in accessing existing apprenticeship, training and skills development opportunities has been provided to businesses and young people across the Park.
- 7.9 Website - A new Community Partnership website was launched in May, along with Community Partnership accounts for Facebook and Twitter and a dedicated Skills Partnership Facebook account.

### **Built Heritage Repair Grant (BHRG)**

- 7.10 The BHRG 2014/15 was launched on 30 April 2014 and below is a summary of the applications received with 2013 figures in brackets [ ] for comparison:-
- 97 [127] enquiries received from across the National Park.
  - 28 [39] applications submitted by deadline.
  - Of the 28 applications received 19 [24] were eligible for grant.
  - 14 [10] indicative grant offers were made (3 each in Callander, Gartmore and Drymen, 2 each in Aberfoyle and Blairmore and 1 in Luss).
- 7.11 By 12 September 2014, of the 14 indicative offers made:-
- 10 indicative awards had been accepted with 6 formal grant offers signed and returned.
  - 1 indicative award was accepted but the offer subsequently withdrawn as property on market for sale.
  - 3 indicative awards rejected.
- 7.12 Examples of works that have been allocated grants are:



Murray House , Gartmore – replacing concrete roof tiles with slate.



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Ashbank, Drymen – sash and case window refurbishment.

### 8. LEADER Update

8.1 Members will recall approving a paper regarding issues surrounding the new LEADER programme as it affects the Park area at the June 2013 Board meeting. Members authorised officers to negotiate with the current LAG administrations and with Scottish Government to achieve improvements on the current arrangements affecting the National Park area which:

- respond innovatively to the impact of declining funding and Scottish Government expectations of LEADER reform;
- will deliver greater strategic alignment to National Park area rural development priorities; and
- give tangible administrative improvements for National Park community, charitable and business groups and associations making cross or pan-Park applications to minimise excessive bureaucracy currently experienced.

8.2 At the December 2013 Board meeting, members agreed to withdraw the NP Expression of Interest subject to reassurance from the Scottish Government.

8.3 Argyll & the Islands and Forth Valley & Lomond LAGs submitted final drafts of their Local Development Strategies (LDS) on the 30th of September 2014. NPA Officers worked with both LAGs as they developed their LDS, with a particular focus on the funding priorities and the business plans of the new programme. This has resulted in complimentary priorities in both strategies with those in the National Park and also the inclusion of a 'cooperation project' – the joint sub-LAG which is outlined in Appendix 1 and discussed below.

8.4 Points of Note for the 2014-20 Programme



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- There is an increased focus on driving economic development, either directly or indirectly.
- The LEADER budget for 2014-20 is £66 million. This will be delivered by 21 LAGs across Scotland.
- The SRDP Small Business Support Scheme will also be delivered through LEADER. This scheme has a total value of £20 million. The model of delivery for the Scheme is yet to be confirmed.
- The LAGs have been given an indicative minimum budget of £2 million, with 25% for administration/animation and 11% for cooperation. Most LAGs appear to be 'bidding' for significantly more than the minimum.
- The current SRDP programme is overcommitted and this may result in a reduction of the 2014-20 LEADER budget.

### 8.5 Key Dates for the 2014-20 Programme

- Submit final LDS and Business Plan, September 2014
- LDS assessment by independent panel, November 2014
- Indicative allocations, December 2014
- Satisfying conditions of LDS assessment, Jan – March 2015
- Service Level Agreements (SG and Accountable Bodies), Jan – March 2015
- Subject to above, LAGs become operational, Jan – April 2015

8.6 Arrangements for the National Park Area: NPA Officers worked closely with LEADER staff during the development of Business Plans regarding the arrangements for the National Park area. The resulting 'National Park Joint sub-LAG' has been agreed by both LAG chairs and will be included in the final Business Plans. This delivers new enhanced arrangements for the National Park area for 2014-2020.

8.7 The Joint sub-LAG will oversee an initial assessment process that will assess projects for delivery against the A&I LDS, the FVL LDS and NP area priorities. It will also ensure that the potential clarifications or information requirements of both LAGs are co-ordinated and addressed upfront, thereby minimising complexities for the applicant and reducing the risk of conflicting decisions being reached once referred to both LAGs for final decision. The Joint sub-LAG will be:

- concerned with cooperation projects within the National Park Area;
- empowered by the A&I and FVL LAGs to consider, discuss and make recommendations on National Park area projects;
- supported by joint-work of the A&I and FVL Development Officers.

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- employed on a case-by-case basis and as prompted by the receipt of an Initial Enquiry to either LEADER programme; and
- supported by processes that have been streamlined from the applicant's perspective, including one application form and one 'lead LAG' for reporting and claiming.

Full details of these arrangements can be found in Appendix 1.

- 8.8 The NP sections of the LDS and Business Plan set the context of a National Park 'Project' submission at the start of the new programme. This submission includes the LLTNP development officer/project officer/animator role. All parties recognise the value of such a role in delivering against the priorities of the LDS and are committed to an early stage 'Project' submission.

## 9 APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - Agreed Arrangements for the National Park Joint sub-LAG

**Author:** Bob Cook, Development and Implementation Manager  
Stuart Mearns, Forward Planning Manager  
**Executive Sponsor:** Gordon Watson, Director of Operations