National Park Authority Board Meeting

Agenda Item 5

Core Paths Plan Review

Paper for approval

1. <u>Purpose</u>

   The purpose of this paper is to inform the Board of the forthcoming Core Paths Plan review and highlight some of the key proposed changes to the network ahead of a formal public 12 week consultation in October. It also provides a short synopsis of the statutory role of the National Park Authority in relation to core paths.

2. <u>Recommendation</u>

   The Board is asked to approve the proposed content and consultation questions for the forthcoming Core Paths Plan Review, ahead of the formal public consultation.

3. <u>Contribution to National Park Partnership Plan and/or Our 5-year Plan</u>

   3.1. Within the Partnership Plan we commit to "ensuring that the National Park Core Paths are reviewed and fit for purpose" under Visitor Experience Outcome 5, (Recreation Opportunities) which outlines that we wish to be a National Park which has a wide variety of well promoted and managed outdoor recreation opportunities providing for a range of abilities and interests.

   3.2. Specifically Priority 5.1 states that one measure towards Improving and extending the National Park's recreational path network is by ensuring that the National Park Core Paths are reviewed and fit for purpose.

4. <u>Background</u>

   4.1. The National Park Authority is the statutory Access Authority for the area and as such has four core duties under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. These are:

   (i) to facilitate a Local Access Forum,

   (ii) to uphold public access rights as provided under the legislation,

   (iii) to promote responsible behaviour in line with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and,

   (iv) to create and review a Core Paths Plan for the area.

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4.2.   What are Core Paths? These should be the most important paths (of any width or surface) within the network which provide the public with reasonable access throughout the National Park.

4.3.   They can be paths that communities require to carry out daily journeys from home to school or work, or paths which allow both residents and visitors to fully explore the National Park, such as the West Highland Way. Other paths exist and complete the path network however the Core Path network should form that core system of paths that provide a reasonable level of provision.

4.4.   A path having core path status brings no additional duties upon the National Park Authority however it does provide additional powers to do anything considered appropriate to maintain the path, keep it free from obstruction or encroachment, and provide the public with directions through signage and promotion.

4.5.   The National Park Authority adopted its first Core Paths Plan in June 2010 fulfilling its duty, under section 17 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003.

4.6.   The existing Core Paths Plan was prepared using specially designed and agreed selection criteria, and involved an extensive period of public consultation, community and partner engagement, mapping and assessment of paths and concluded with a Scottish Government Reporter's Unit hearing on the unwithdrawn objections which provides a recommendation to the Minister on whether to adopt or not.

4.7.   The current network of core paths consists of 732km of cycle tracks, hill paths, historic routes, footways (pavements), forest tracks, short sections of quiet minor roads and off-road paths in towns, villages and wider countryside of the National Park.

4.8.   The core path provision is largely centred around settlements where people live or places people visit and connecting paths both in and outside the National Park. Importance is placed on both the functional aspects associated with active travel and healthy choices; and recreational aspects that form an important part of our visitor experience, and promotion of the National Park's special qualities.
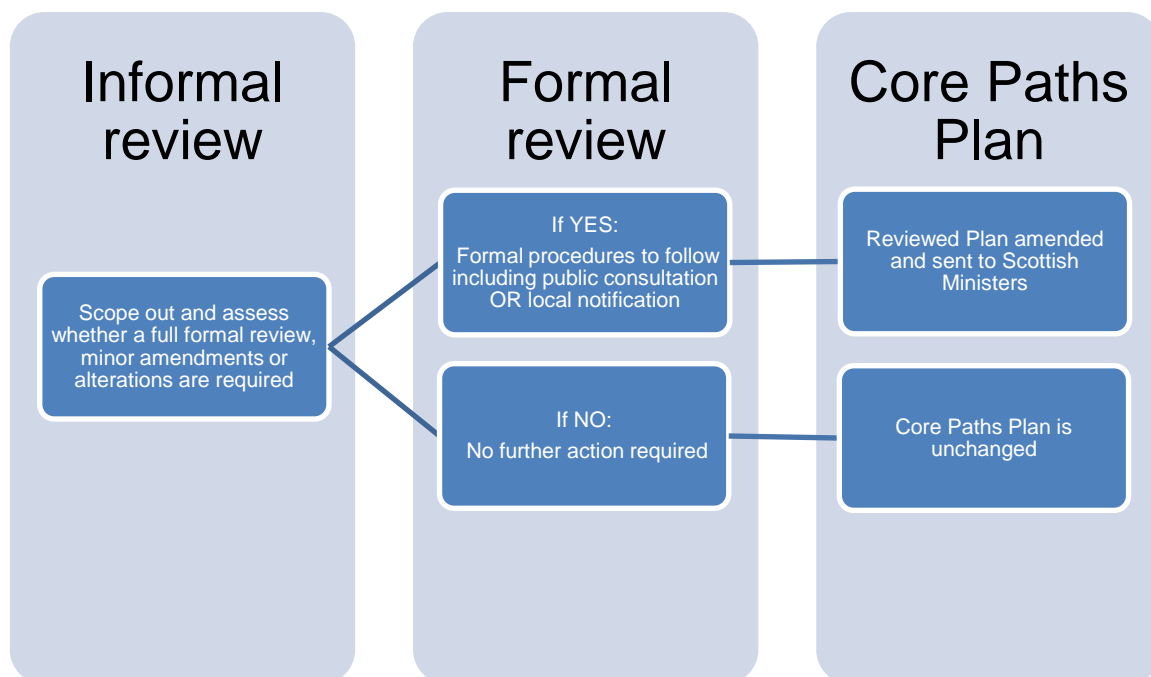
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5. <u>Review Process</u>

5.1. The National Park Authority had intended to review its Core Paths Plan alongside the current Local Development Plan in 2017, however this changed due to a Scottish Government review and improvement to the statutory processes for reviewing and amending Core Paths Plans. These have been addressed in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016.

5.2. The purpose of the review is to ensure that the Plan continues to recognise the essential core paths that provide sufficient access throughout the National Park area. In order to ascertain whether or not the Plan meets this requirement an informal review was undertaken with the Local Access Forum[1] to scope out any issues and gather evidence to inform the appropriate next steps.

5.3. The review process is summarised below:

Informal review	Formal review	Core Paths Plan
Scope out and assess whether a full formal review, minor amendments or alterations are required	If YES: Formal procedures to follow including public consultation OR local notification	Reviewed Plan amended and sent to Scottish Ministers
	If NO: No further action required	Core Paths Plan is unchanged

5.4. In terms of the level of review required, these can be summarised as:

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[1] The role of the Local Access Forum is to advise the National Park Authority and the public on issues relating to the right of responsible access under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. They give advice on core paths planning, rights of way, issues around the exercising of access rights, and management of outdoor access and recreation. They can also help the National Park Authority with other access related work in the National Park, like signage standards or advice to recreational users.

- No changes required = no action

- One path change (addition, deletion or re-alignment) = single amendment procedure

- Several changes = full formal review

5.5.   The National Park Authority's Recreation, Access & Health Team were aware that more than single additions and deletions were likely to be required to reflect changes to the path network and core paths since adoption in 2010. Following discussion at the Local Access Forum meetings in January and May 2017, the Local Access Forum met in December 2017 to review the existing Core Paths Plan and offer their opinion as to whether a full review was required. At that meeting it was unanimously agreed that a full review was required.

6.   <u>The Development of Proposed Changes</u>

6.1.   Throughout 2017-18 staff have developed the scoping of issues and evidence gathering which has informed the extent of any potential changes required to the plan either as new core paths, removal of core paths or amendments to alignments.

6.2.   A key point of note is that at the Local Access Forum meeting on 6th December 2017 the Forum agreed that the criteria and scoring system developed by the National park Authority and used during the 2010 Core Path Plan process remained robust and fit for purpose and should continue to be applied within the review process.

6.3.   The 10 criteria used to determine whether a path should have core path status can be seen within Appendix 1. This also shows the scoring guidelines used for a path to be proposed as a core path. A path must score more than 4 on 6 or more criteria to qualify as a potential core path.

6.4.   Throughout 2018 staff including the GIS team have been working closely to map the entire path network across the National Park as it currently stands. This has involved adding new paths, scoring these to see if they meet the criteria for Core Paths Status. All of this has involved input from the Local Access Forum.

6.5.   This work has also involved rescoring paths that were previously mapped to assess whether they still 'rate' the same as their original scores and ensure that the core path network remains fit for purpose.

6.6.   As part of wider stakeholder engagement in July 2018 60 stakeholders were contacted inviting early comments on potential additions, deletions and realignments. This included Community Councils, Community Development Trusts, key landowners, recreation interest groups and national policy partners. 13 responses were received which have informed the development of the proposed changes to the core path network.

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7. <u>Summary of proposed amendments</u>

   7.1. Appendix 2 shows a map of the entire path network with existing core paths shown in purple. Proposed additions of new Core Paths are shown in green, removals shown in red and small realignments shown in blue.

   7.2. The map shows that changes proposed for formal consultation are not significant and that the existing core paths network remains largely fit for purpose aside from some key strategic new paths which have been developed since 2010.

   7.3. In total we are proposing that we consult on 81km of additional core path which is 11% of the network and on the removal of 4km of core path which is less than 1% of the network. A significant proportion of proposed additional core path length is due to strategic developments on Loch Earn Railway Path; NCN7 at Strathyre; The Great Trossachs Path and the Statute Labour Road.

8. <u>Proposed additions</u>

   8.1. The path developments that have occurred across the National Park since the creation of the current Core Plan in 2010 have now been mapped accurately and several have scored highly against the core path criteria and we would propose that they are added to the core path network.

   8.2. These are the Cormonachan Woods community path network; the Lochgoilhead community riverside path (if completed by March 2019); the Dalrigh to Tyndrum shared use path developed by Loch Lomond & Trossachs Countryside Trust; the Loch Earn railway path between St Fillans and Lochearnhead; the National Cycle Network north of Strathyre; The Great Trossachs Path which links Kilmahog and Brig O'Turk and the RSPB Loch Lomond loop path near Gartocharn.

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8.3. We would propose to add a number of previously existing routes that we now believe meet the criteria due to changes in circumstance. These being: a valuable eastern shore kayak access on the Ardgarten Peninsula; a forest road link at Stronchullin Burn; the alternative Ben Ledi assent; the Statute Labour Road strategic link south of Loch Chon and Loch Ard; School Road at Gartocharn to link into the National Cycling Network and the John Muir Way and furthermore some paths within the Gartmore path network.

8.4. The strategic value of Scotland's Great Trails[2] has also increased in recent years and consequently it is proposed that the whole lengths of those key routes now score sufficiently to merit core path status. Those missing links are the Cowal Way alternative by Strachur and Rob Roy Way sections at Killin (link into Perth & Kinross); Strathyre; South Loch Venachar; Loch Ard Forest; Braeval and Dounans in Aberfoyle.

9. <u>Proposed Deletions</u>

9.1. When the 2010 Core Path Plan was adopted paths were included which were expected to be delivered within a two year deadline. Unfortunately the Gartmore Drum Wood was not developed and should now be removed from the network.

9.2. Some networks and promotional activities have changed since 2010 and in response to those changes we would propose that a small number of path links are removed from the formal core path network. Those are in: Ardentinny; Kilmun & Blairmore; Lochgoilhead forestry link; Ewich forest link west of Crianlarich; Callander Crags; Braeval and Lemahamish. In all of these cases preferable new paths are now in existence within the immediate vicinity.

10. <u>Realignments</u>

10.1. This process, both formal and informal, allows us to correct small mapping and alignment errors within the existing path network and dataset. Those small changes are on the Cowal Way at Curra Lochain; St Fillans; Ben Ledi; Callander Crags; National Cycle Network at Loch Achray; Gartmore and Garadhban.

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[2] Scotland's Great Trails are nationally promoted trails for people-powered journeys. Each is distinctively waymarked, largely off road and has a range of visitor services. At least 25 miles in length, they are suitable for multi-day outings as well as day trips. Collectively the 29 routes provide over 1,900 miles of well managed paths from the Borders to the Highlands

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11. Additional points to note

   11.1. Several suggestions have been gathered through the informal consultation process on specific themes such as upland access and other local path networks. All suggestions have been investigated and re-scored however some have not qualified for the required number of criteria. This does not mean that those paths do not have value but simply that we do not believe that they are essential within the network to provide sufficient public access to the area with the information available at this time. Access rights still apply to those areas and the National Park Authority has powers within the Land Reform Act to keep them open and free from obstruction if required. Such cases include; Ben Lui, Gleann Auchreoch, Ben More, Glen Kendrum, Ballimore to Strathyre and Boturich Loop.

   11.2. It should also be noted that the stakeholder engagement process has also gathered valuable information of community and partner path development priorities and aspirations. That information cannot influence this process as paths need to be in-situ to qualify as a core path, however the National Park Authority will be reviewing the Outdoor Recreation Plan over the next year and therefore these proposals can be further considered during this process.

12. Formal Consultation Process

   12.1. Once approved by the National Park Authority Board the Review will enter the Formal Consultation phase. The procedural flow chart shown in Appendix 3 has been developed by SNH and other Access Authorities showing in detailed process that we intend to follow.

   12.2. It should be noted that owners and occupiers of any land where an additional core path is proposed must be consulted within the formal process. This was not previously the case and is a change to the legislation.

   12.3. The intention is that the consultation will be available primarily online, built on the 'QuestionWhere' application and Appendix 4 shows how this would appear to the public. This system will allow the public to easily view all current mapping and proposed changes, allow them to comment on any of these proposals or suggest and map their own.

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12.4. To ensure that no one is excluded from the process hard copy maps and response forms will also be available at venues throughout the Park over the 12 week period and the Access & Recreation Team will be hosting three geographically spread drop-in sessions.

12.5. The proposed remaining timeline would be:

- 2018 Oct – Dec: Public consultation (12 weeks)
- 2019 Jan – Feb: Resolve objections (to proposed amendments only)
- 2019 March: Adopt Plan (subject to any outstanding objections)

13. <u>Conclusion</u>

13.1. The comprehensive public consultation and path selection process conducted through 2006 to 2010 has left a positive, lasting legacy of a Core Paths Plan which is widely accepted and respected throughout the National Park area. Consequently there are a limited number of suggested amendments for review, reflecting the quality of the work done previously and celebrates some exceptional new paths constructed in the years since which enhance the local and strategic networks.

Appendix 1 – Selection Criteria
Appendix 2 – Core Path Plan Review Map
Appendix 3 – Formal Consultation Procedure
Appendix 4 – Online Consultation Demonstration

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