

Trees and Woodland Strategy



Paper for decision

1. Purpose

- 1.1. To present Members with the revised Trees and Woodland Strategy for the National Park following public consultation and request that it be formally approved as a strategy for the National Park.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1. Board members are asked to:

- (i) **Note** the Consultation Report and progress update;
- (ii) **Note** that the associated statutory assessments are complete and conclude that the plan will not have adverse environmental effects;
- (iii) **Approve** the content of the revised plan;
- (iv) **Agree** to delegate final minor design and editorial adjustments to officers prior to publication in November.

3. Contribution to National Park Partnership Plan and Our 5-year Plan

- 3.1. **National Park Partnership Plan (NPPP)** - This strategy will provide direction as to how and where new woodland should be created to deliver the NPPP target of 2,000 ha of new woodland by 2023. It will also outline how existing trees and woodland should be managed to safeguard and enhance the special landscape qualities of the Park and deliver other NPPP Outcomes for Conservation & Land Management, Visitor Experience and Rural Development. Outcome 1 Natural Capital and Outcome 3 Climate Change are particularly relevant in light of the Biodiversity Crisis and Climate Emergency.
- 3.2. **Our 5-Year Plan** - The strategy will provide direction to woodland and tree planting proposals which would contribute to the delivery of Wild Park priorities and how woodland proposals could contribute to Live Park.

4. Background

- 4.1. The purpose of the strategy is to help deliver the outcomes and objectives set out in the National Park Partnership Plan 2018-23 and Scotland's Forestry Strategy 2019-2028 by guiding the development and approval of forest and woodland creation and management proposals in the National Park. The audience for the plan are land owners and managers, agents, community groups and other statutory agencies.
- 4.2. Scottish Government has set ambitious national targets for new woodland creation increasing to 15,000 ha by 2024/25 which the strategy will help deliver. In addition it is recognised that the strategy will deliver for a range of related national policy

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priorities including climate change, flood management, water quality, biodiversity, health and access.

- 4.3. Almost all woodland creation and management proposals are regulated by Scottish Forestry under the Forestry and Land Management (Scotland) Bill 2018 and Forestry (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Scotland) Regulations 2017, with the National Park Authority as a consultee. In addition, some smaller proposals may be dealt with through the Planning process, e.g. as mitigation for development.
- 4.4. The new Programme for Government (2020/21) has given extra focus to the role of woodland creation and protecting biodiversity in contributing to Scotland's transition to net zero carbon emissions.
- 4.5. Approximately 30% or 52,300 ha of the National Park is currently covered by woodland: around 22.5% productive conifers and 7.5% native woodlands. For comparison, the current woodland extent for Scotland is about 17% and the European Union's average is 38%. Our native woodlands are of global importance for nature as they include part of the world's rare temperate rainforests and also contain the most southerly remnants of Scotland's ancient Caledonian pine forests.
- 4.6. The key challenges facing our existing woodlands are:
 - unsustainable browsing and grazing impacts from both domestic and non-domestic herbivores;
 - invasive non-native species including plant pathogens, that displace native species and are difficult to remove;
 - woodlands with limited species diversity and age structure which reduces their resilience and ability to adapt to future climate change and other environmental and economic changes,
 - limited woodland management grant funding options, e.g. where ecological or economic needs or land manager aspirations don't fit well with the current grant schemes.

Key challenges for woodland expansion include:

- ensuring that new woodlands make a positive contribution to the natural and cultural heritage of the National Park and are integrated with other conservation and land management objectives,
- land supply and acceptance of changes in land use by stakeholders,
- funding regime constraints that may limit uptake by land managers such as budget limitations, attractiveness of incentives, attitudes to risk associated with initial outlay,
- Uncertainties around suitable tree species for planting, in the light of climate change, INNS and the increasing number of plant pathogens and diseases.

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4.7. The strategy covers all scales and types of woodland management from small scale tree planting for landscape and amenity, farm woodlands and productive schemes to native woodlands of all sizes. It will also guide local implementation of the new national Scotland's Forestry Strategy, which was published in February 2019, as well as helping to achieve national woodland creation targets.

5. Progress to date

5.1. After the board's approval of the consultation version of the Strategy, the consultation was launched on the 8th April and closed on the 10th June 2019. Two events were held during the consultation period, which were attended by 20 individuals, mainly land managers, forest managers and agents.

5.2. 21 written responses were submitted during the public consultation period. The responses were from a range of organisation and individuals. The comments were generally constructive suggestions ranging from suggested improvements to the draft strategy, recognising the contribution of trees and woodland to the Park and the overall aspirations set out in the strategy. However a number of responses considered that the strategy did not give sufficient consideration or details regarding topics such as productive forestry, biodiversity issues and wildness. There were also a significant number of comments regarding the vision which lead to it being revised. Some responses related to the National Park Authority's role as a planning authority in relation to planning casework, which were not relevant to this consultation. The strategy has been revised following the analysis of the responses received during the public consultation along with other developments since the draft was produced, particularly the recognition of the biodiversity crisis and Scottish Government's announcement of the climate emergency. A consultation report summarising the responses received in relation to each question is included at Appendix 1. The detailed responses are in Appendix 2.

5.3. Minor amendments to the Habitats Regulations Appraisal were proposed by statutory consultees and these have been incorporated into the final version at Appendix 3. No changes were proposed to the Strategic Environmental Assessment and it has been updated to reflect changes in the strategy. See Appendix 4.

6. Summary of the final Strategy

6.1. The final strategy is attached at Appendix 5. The first objective of the strategy has been amended from the consultation document to give further emphasis to the biodiversity crisis and climate emergency. Others have had minor edits for clarification since members approved the consultation version.

6.2. The strategy has seven objectives:

- (i) Increasing woodland cover for biodiversity and climate change mitigation, with a key focus on improving connectivity of existing native woodland and scrub habitats.

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- (ii) Improving woodland condition and diversifying woodland management to enhance benefits to biodiversity, landscape quality and timber products and services.
- (iii) Protecting and enhancing this nationally important landscape
- (iv) Maintaining and enhancing economic sustainability through forestry related skills and business development.
- (v) Promoting cooperative woodland management and creation as part of an integrated land management approach.
- (vi) Improving community empowerment and resilience through active engagement in woodland management.
- (vii) Encouraging and promoting public access to woodlands for recreation and improving people's quality of life.

6.3. To deliver across these objectives, and reflecting their inter-connectedness, the detailed guidance for delivering the strategy is structured around five main topics. These are essentially the same as those in the consultation document and are summarised below:

- (i) Landscape integration, setting out how forestry proposals should take the landscape character and special landscape qualities of the National Park into account.
- (ii) Habitat enhancements including sections on woodland habitat networks, restructuring of productive conifer including those planted on ancient woodland sites, riparian and montane woodland, key woodland habitats and species and invasive non-native species.
- (iii) Integrating woodland with other land uses, including sections on designated sites, open ground habitats, peatland, deer management, deer fencing, agricultural land management and water and soil management.
- (iv) Social and rural economic development, including sections on woodland management skills, timber products, haulage and timber transport, community empowerment, tourism initiatives, consultation and stakeholder engagement and natural flood management.
- (v) Woodlands and people, including sections on responsible access and health.

6.4. In line with the purpose of the strategy, its success will be measured by gathering information from existing monitoring protocols and processes for the National Park Partnership Plan, Wild Park and the National Forest Inventory. This will ensure efficient use of resources and integration with other plans and programmes.

7. Post-Approval key milestones

7.1. Should the strategy be approved, the following actions are proposed to implement the strategy and to help with national targets and priorities relating to trees and woodland:

- A ministerial launch by Mairi Gougeon MSP is being planned for November.

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- Publish the strategy on-line and print a small number of hard copies. It is proposed to make extensive use of the on-line resources to aid understanding and use of the strategy by all stakeholders.
- Publish a post-adoption statement for the Strategic Environmental Assessment
- Park Authority officers have been successful in securing written agreement from Scottish Forestry that there will now be an increased level of Forestry Grant Scheme payments for specific woodland creation proposals in the preferred and potential areas for woodland creation in the Park. This will be similar to Cairngorms National Park Authority, where uplifts to FGS payments are already available to assist with the delivery of their Strategy.
- Continue the Small Scale Tree planting Grant Scheme, subject to available budgets.
- An ongoing programme of Stakeholder engagement including
 - Research to provide better understanding of the drivers for decision-making in land-use change, in particular woodland creation.
 - Ongoing engagement with Delivery Partners about achieving the Outcomes and indicators of success in the NPPP.
 - Promoting the strategy and its objectives to Deer Management Groups.
 - Training events for land managers relating woodland herbivore impact assessments and native woodland land management.

8. Conclusion

- 8.1. Board members are asked to note progress with the new Trees and Woodland Strategy and approve the revised version of the Strategy, Habitats Regulations Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment following public consultation. Members are asked to agree to delegate final minor design and editorial changes to officers prior to publication.

Appendix 1 – Consultation Report

Appendix 2 – Consultation Responses

Appendix 3 – Habitats Regulations Appraisal

Appendix 4 – Strategic Environmental Assessment

Appendix 5 – Final Trees and Woodland Strategy

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