

National Park Authority Board Meeting

Agenda Item 6

CEO Update



Paper for discussion

1. Purpose

- 1.1. The purpose of this paper is to update the Board how we have responded operationally to the COVID-19 pandemic, our plans for phased reopening of sites in line with Scottish Government Route Map and also the implications for creating our Mission Zero route map to reduce our carbon emissions. The COVID-19 pandemic has had wide-ranging impacts on our organisation and the National Park itself. These impacts are evolving as the pandemic endures, including how we plan and implement our operational responses to changes in Government policy and the lockdown measures.
- 1.2. This paper outlines:
 - Some high-level **context** for how we are structuring our thinking and working with partners in light of the pandemic;
 - The impact the pandemic has had on **staff wellbeing**, and some measures we have taken to address this;
 - Our planning and implementation for **restarting operations** within the National Park, including at our own sites and through our partnership work with others.
- 1.3. Officers have been keeping the Convener and the Chairs and Executive Group updated on operational decision making as we have moved through different stages of lockdown and Scottish Government restrictions and guidance. Board members are invited to comment on the issues and points raised in this paper in order to help inform ongoing responses to the pandemic.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1. Members are requested to note the contents of the report.

3. Context and Early COVID-19 Response

- 3.1. As with most other organisations, we shut down all of our operations within the National Park in late March and our staff have been working from home. We have recently restarted some field activities, as we look to gradually reopen the National Park in line with partners and the Scottish Government's Route Map.
- 3.2. As with much of the global response to the pandemic, we have had to react and adapt rapidly and in unprecedented ways. The main phase of our emergency

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responses began in earnest on the day of the last Board meeting on 16th March, when the UK Government issued late afternoon advice on social distancing, including, minimising social contact including avoiding public gatherings, avoiding public transport and working from home where possible. Consequently, all staff received a message that evening to work from home from 17th March and for the foreseeable future. A Resilience Team had already been formed to address all aspects of business continuity planning. Immediate priorities were to ensure continuity of essential business systems such as remote IT access, financial payments, and call handling. All National Park facilities were closed with the exception of some public toilets.

- 3.3. On the weekend of 21st March, 2020, when the prospect of new UK and Scottish Government restrictions was imminent, the National Park became incredibly busy, with the volume of visitors similar to a summer bank holiday weekend. Reports were received of communities being overrun, including shop shelves being emptied and widespread disregard for social distancing. On the morning of Sunday 22nd March the decision was taken to close all National Park Authority public sites that were still open, including car parks and this was implemented over the following days along with strong messaging sent through social media urging people not to travel to the National Park.
- 3.4. On the evening of 23rd March, the Prime Minister announced a full national lockdown. All non-essential staff travel and access to buildings was stopped. At this point all active construction and contractor works were stopped. With the closure of all buildings and facilities a programme of essential building/site inspections (for site safety and security), and safe staff deployment for these was prepared. In particular the following should be noted:
 - a. All staff are working from home unless authorised by the Executive to carry out an essential task which is satisfactorily risk assessed.
 - b. Remote access for staff to essential systems was been successfully implemented.
 - c. Operation of financial and payment systems continued and the end of financial year processes were well managed.
 - d. A small number of capital projects were halted at close to completion stage and there is a delay to some essential facilities repair work being carried out.
 - e. All National Park Authority gated sites and buildings are closed to the public until restrictions on travel for recreation are lifted.
 - f. All campsites and camping permit areas are closed to campers and the camping byelaws are still in force.
 - g. Tenants have closed down their operations and upon request have been granted a 3-month rent holiday subject to review.
 - h. No face-to-face meetings or site visits are being undertaken unless an emergency requires otherwise (some Planning enforcement site visits have been undertaken).

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- i. Board and Committee business will require to be held virtually until Government restrictions allow otherwise.
- 3.5. The shutdown of all of our sites and transitioning our staff to working from home over a short period of time required a lot of rapid decision making and the establishment of new ways of working to maintain essential services including back office and frontline, including the Planning service. Members are asked to note and endorse the steps taken by the Executive to respond to lockdown.
- 3.6. Since then we have been planning for reopening visitor services and how best to support recovery from the longer term impacts of such an unprecedented pandemic. This has had to take account that the move away from lockdown will mean having to find ways to deliver services and functions into the medium term that are safe while the virus is still a threat. This means that many staff will be required to work from home for the foreseeable future and that new safe working practices will have to be developed which protects those who are required to be out in the field. Similarly the safe operation of visitor sites and facilities has and will continue require careful planning.
- 3.7. The Scottish Tourism Emergency Response Group (STERG) is using a four-step approach to guide work through the pandemic. We have used this approach to help us structure our own thinking on how the National Park addresses the challenges of COVID-19.
 - **Respond:** Our immediate actions as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged fall into this phase (summarised above). We acted quickly with action to protect the health and safety of our staff, visitors, and communities. We also supported businesses by sharing information on Government support, ensuring our own and external networks were discussing key issues facing the National Park, and providing a rent holiday to tenants at our sites. In addition, one of our key responses was to establish a system for staff who are unable to carry out their usual roles to undertake 'civic duties' by volunteering with partner local authorities, carrying out activities such as food and medicine deliveries for vulnerable people.
 - **Reset:** We are largely in this phase at the moment, but are increasingly looking towards the Restart phase. Primarily, the Reset stage has been about stabilising the organisation under its new ways of remote working (e.g. focus on ICT provision and HR support), undertaking detailed work internally and with partners to plan for the restart and recovery phases, and considering how COVID-19 will affect our original Annual Operational Plan and Budget.
 - **Restart:** The phasing of our restart work is largely determined by the Scottish Government's Route Map, which sets out how it expects to gradually change

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and lift the restrictions currently in place. Moving to Phase 1 of this Route Map on May 29th means that we have now begun to restart some of our operations including maintenance work on some of our sites and preparing buildings and vehicles for use by staff. The significant number of people who have ignored the Scottish Government 5-mile travel distance guidance for permitted recreation activity and visited the National Park while facilities and car parks are closed has led to the remobilisation of Ranger and Land Operations Team staff to cope with the consequent pressures and impacts. Staff resources focussed on reopening planning have been diverted to co-ordinate significant partnership work with the four Councils, Police Scotland, Transport Scotland and Forestry and Land Scotland to deal with visitor management, enforcement and significant litter clearance.

- **Recovery:** Thinking on the recovery phase is building but is still at an early stage. We expect the UK and Scottish Government's considerations, plans, and priorities to continue to emerge. In the meantime, we are considering what actions we can take to support the National Park's longer term goals, the economic recovery and the resilience of our communities as we move out of the pandemic. Our focus for these is on areas familiar to the Board and our partners, such as addressing the climate and nature emergencies, helping communities, supporting the rural economy, and improving the visitor experience, among others.

3.8. Partnership working has been critical to us carrying out our work effectively through the pandemic. We have been working closely with the following groups:

- **Communities:** Direct communication to community organisations at key points of change; inclusion of weekly updates in the Community Partnership e-newsletter; holding of the first of a series of video-conferences for all National Park communities to participate (first one discussed the handling of Route Map Phase 1 implications)
- **Businesses:** The National Park Destination Group is meeting at least fortnightly. This has been a useful forum to discuss and identify gaps in Government support schemes. Monthly meetings are being held with Cabinet Secretary for Tourism, Fergus Ewing MSP to discuss the significant issues faced by tourism businesses and how best to protect jobs until recovery is possible.
- **Local delivery bodies:** A National Park Safe Recovery Action Group (the four Councils, Police Scotland, Transport Scotland and Forestry and Land Scotland) has been convened and chaired by the National Park Authority CEO. The group provides a crucial mechanism to co-ordinate how and when public facilities are reopened, the enforcement of ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, the responses to non-compliant visitor pressures, particularly traffic management and a shared

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communication strategy ensuring consistent public messages and maximisation of our collective reach.

- National partners: The National Park Authority is attending and advising on a number of national level fora. As well as regular meetings of the Scottish Government Environment and Economy Leadership Group, contributing to a sub-group of the Scottish Tourism Emergency Response Group.
- Sectoral and Non-governmental groups: Regular meetings are being held with senior environmental NGO executives (RSPB, Woodland Trust Scotland, and National Trust for Scotland have sites in the National Park) and recreation NGOs (Ramblers Scotland, Mountaineering Scotland). Scottish Land and Estates are assisting with co-ordinating meetings with landowners across the National Park.

4. Update on staff wellbeing

4.1. The health and wellbeing of our staff has been our number one priority since the crisis first began to emerge. We have taken a number of steps to support our staff including (among other measures)

- Clear and consistent communication to our staff. For example, as the crisis was emerging and the situation was changing rapidly, regular CEO emails were sent to update and reassure staff on the measures being taken. Since then we have put in place a weekly staff bulletin, covering the latest COVID-19 developments, organisational updates, as well as a social element to keep staff in touch with each other while working remotely. Communication with teams and staff members by individual managers has also increased significantly to ensure ongoing engagement and support with staff working remotely from home.
- Explicit recognition by the Executive team that productivity will be lower than usual. Technology limitations, the sudden change in ways of working and processes, and in particular the need to juggle the non-work impacts of the pandemic such as caring and home-schooling responsibilities, means that our staff are not able to the same levels of productivity as before the crisis. To minimise the stress and anxiety this could cause, we have reinforced with staff and managers the need to be realistic about deliverables, and that any resulting risks arising from delays or non-delivery should be escalated to identify any potential mitigations or to reinforce acceptance of the risk.
- Flexible HR policies in response to the pandemic. The impacts of COVID-19 stretch to almost everything in life and this has meant very real impacts for many of our staff. We have temporarily adjusted our sickness policy to ensure that any staff impacted by the virus have the time off they need without penalty.

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We have also provided additional flexibility on working hours for those with caring responsibilities. Contingencies are available for staff that are unable to work their full hours due to the pandemic.

- Additional measures such as additional HR support to managers, and providing regular wellbeing reminders and tips including reminding staff about our employee assistance programme and access to support if needed.

4.2. Despite these significant measures, the size and breadth of the crisis means that it extends much beyond work and has affected the overall mental and physical wellbeing of some of our staff. We are continuing to work with managers to help address emerging wellbeing issues.

4.3. In line with the Scottish Government's Route Map, we expect many of our staff to continue to work from home for the foreseeable future. However, a number of our staff including in particular our field staff have begun to return to the workplace to undertake patrols and litter clearance as well as to prepare sites for reopening and ensure they are safe and properly maintained for visitors. In this, staff safety is a top priority. Following the Scottish Government relaxation on outdoor working and the recent issuing of guidance, we have developed detailed operational guidance for addressing the COVID-19 safety impacts of work outside the home, and we are implementing risk assessments and staff training and awareness to ensure we take proportionate measures to protect our staff from COVID-19 in the workplace.

5. Looking forward to restarting operations

5.1. The emergence of the pandemic meant we had to take unprecedented measures to cease operations quickly and shut down our sites and offices. We are now at the beginning of an equally unprecedented restarting of our operations.

5.2. Planning for this started in April based on a few different scenarios, looking at how and when restrictions might be lifted, and therefore what we would need to consider under each scenario. As we entered May, there was some further clarity on how restrictions might be eased. This has enabled us to consider our plans with more specificity.

5.3. Nonetheless, the task is significant and there is a large amount that we need to develop and implement. The biggest challenge is ensuring our actions are safe, given that the COVID-19 may be with us for some time, including for our staff, communities, and visitors. In addition, though we have linked our plans to the four phases of the Scottish Government's Route Map, the overall timing and detail will continue to emerge and change, meaning our plans need to be responsive.

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- 5.4. Primarily, our work to restart operations is working through (1) how we reopen the National Park's visitor operations, and (2) how we make our activities 'COVID-safe'.

Visitor operations

- 5.5. Our plan for reopening visitor operations includes a gradual ramping up of activities. We have plotted out how we plan to move through undertaking site checks and critical maintenance, as well as opening car parks, toilet facilities, and key sites such as the Duncan Mills Memorial Slipway and Balmaha Visitor Centre. The plan also considers how Ranger patrols can be undertaken in the context of social-distancing.
- 5.6. In addition, our own visitor sites cannot be considered in isolation. Therefore we are working closely with partners, particularly local delivery bodies such as local authorities, Forestry and Land Scotland, and Police Scotland, to implement a joined-up approach to reopening visitor sites. To enable this we set-up and are chairing regular meetings of a new National Park Safe Recovery Action Group (NPSRAG) that is working collaboratively on this. The group has been crucial in agreeing responses to the recent visitor influx that coincided with Phase 1 relaxations. We also are in regular communication with our Scottish Government colleagues to ensure we are considering the national context and also providing advice on the broader approach to lifting restrictions.
- 5.7. The NPSRAG initially worked in anticipation of the announcement of Phase 1 of the Scottish Government Route Map coming into force on 29th May. This permitted a range of non-contact outdoor recreation activities and meeting one other household in public spaces accompanied by guidance to travel no more than 5 miles to undertake a recreation activity. Scottish Government guidance also advised that public car parks that were closed should remain closed and this was reiterated by the First Minister at her press conference with a specific reference made to National Parks. The relaxation coincided with the warmest weather yet this year and consequently the National Park experienced the full impact of an unprecedented set of circumstances stemming from mass non-compliance with the guidance not to travel more than 5 miles. Many places were inundated with large amounts of irresponsible and dangerous parking on road verges in hotspots like Arrochar, Luss, Balmaha, Falls of Falloch, Loch Lubnaig and parts of Callander. There were large gatherings of people in Balloch and Luss and huge amounts of litter left at sites such as Falls of Falloch. Despite the Duncan Mills Memorial Slipway remaining closed, there was significant powered craft activity on Loch Lomond, particularly jet-skis using alternative access points.
- 5.8. In advance of, during and since that weekend we have worked hard with our partners to share information on what was happening and to implement and adjust

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management responses at particular locations. This included road restrictions (local access only at East Loch Lomond, temporary speed restrictions and/or clearways at A82 Falls of Falloch/A84 Loch Lubnaig), extensive mobile variable signage, additional Police Scotland patrols, traffic enforcement officers, Ranger land and boat patrols, and an enormous amount of litter has been collected from heavily visited sites. We received a wealth of information from staff, volunteers and people in the community using our newly-created 'feedback' inbox. This helped us gather local intelligence from community members, land managers and tourism businesses, some of which was used in 'real time' by the staff working over the weekend and to inform decision-making since. Throughout there was a co-ordinated campaign encouraging people to stay local which has achieved extensive reach and coverage with all partners promoting each other's messages. The group will continue to meet to co-ordinate resources, enforcement and traffic management actions as well as future phases of reopening.

Making our activities COVID-safe

- 5.9. The other main workstream in restarting operations is making our activities 'COVID-safe'. This means developing and putting in place practices that ensure we are eliminating or mitigating the risk that COVID-19 poses.
- 5.10. The starting point for this is that we expect most staff to continue to work from home for the foreseeable future, in line with Scottish Government guidance. However, as described above there are various activities that cannot be undertaken from home, so we need to ensure we have the right measures to enable this.
- 5.11. We have developed detailed operational guidance that sets out the physical distancing, hygiene, and cleaning steps we need to take in order to make our work 'COVID-safe'. This operational guidance is then used by managers to develop detailed risk assessments and associated risk mitigation measures for different activities that will be undertaken. It is also being used to put in place adaptations to our buildings and vehicles.
- 5.12. At present, the types of activities we are expecting to restart in the coming weeks are all of those associated with the early restarting of our visitor operations (e.g. site maintenance and remedial works, Ranger patrols), limited office based activity (e.g. to fulfil requirements of planning processes, or to undertake essential ICT upgrades), and site visits (e.g. for planning enforcement cases or key access and conservation tasks). As time progresses we would look to increase our visitor operations, restart some construction activities on capital projects, and potentially undertake more office-based work.

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5.13. In doing this we must ensure staff are aware of what we are putting in place, what they need to do, and that they have opportunity to contribute to the measures. We have been consulted our trade union in developing the guidance and are working on a communications plan in order to engage and raise awareness with staff.

6. Mission Zero Board Update

6.1. In March, the Board were presented with an Annual Progress Report which outlined work completed across the 2019/20 year towards Climate Change activity. That paper also outlined the proposed way forwards in line with our agreed focus on working towards achieving Net Zero emissions as a National Park Authority.

6.2. Since then, COVID-19 has fundamentally shifted the landscape within which this work operates. Whilst it has altered the previously agreed path and led to uncertainties such as workforce availability, and the repositioning of the Annual Operational Plan and budgets for 2020; it has also provided us with an opportunity to consider how achieving Net Zero as the National Park Authority fits into the bigger jigsaw of the Climate and Nature Emergencies. Now more than ever, we want to reflect on what motivates us and how nature and sustainability is at the heart of all the work we undertake. So, despite the challenges faced and the priority work required to overcome COVID -19, the Climate and Nature Emergencies and our immediate Net Zero work remain a critical focus for us. At a national level this area of work is now emerging as 'the Green Recovery Plan'.

6.3. The following update provides information about progress since the March update and outlines our next steps for this area of work.

6.4. **Focus on Net Zero:** Our priority over the last quarter has been working towards a deeper understanding of the different activities that contribute to the National Park Authority's current overall carbon emissions, and therefore how we need to focus our attention moving forwards to reduce these.

6.5. As part of this a **Net Zero emissions 'boundary' for the National Park Authority has been agreed**. The *boundary* in this context, explains which of our emissions generating activities are included within the scope of our Net Zero work, and therefore which activity we will focus our emissions reduction on. The following areas are to be included within this emissions boundary:

- Transport (Fleet: land and water), 'Grey fleet' (personal car use for work purposes), and Public transport;
- Electricity use across all our sites;
- Buildings (Gas: natural and LPG, Water and Woodchip);
- Waste.

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- 6.6. **We are gathering and analysing our baseline data.** For each of these emissions areas we have analysed the data held and understand where we have good quality figures. Where this is held, we have been able to draft initial emissions reduction targets through discussion with operational teams. However, as this baseline data set is not complete, there are a number of actions which have been prioritised to allow us to fully understand the starting point across all our emissions. An example of this is the need to map all electric vehicle charging points across the National Park to enable us to understand more fully, where more may be needed, and therefore the timescales around our transition to our draft target of a 90% electric vehicle fleet. We are working towards a complete set of targets by the end of the 20/21 year and will ensure to bring back a full set of draft targets prior to this.
- 6.7. **Internal and external communications are underway.** As outlined in previous Board papers, in order for us to achieve Net Zero as a National Park Authority, we require fundamental shifts in some of our operations and behaviours. Through a focus on data gathering and target setting, we have been able to start the important internal communications required to support us along this journey. In conjunction with this internal work, we have remained linked to our partners in the Scottish Government Greener Communicators Group and the Environment & Economy Leaders Group and other engagement groups to ensure that we are best placed to understand our role in the Green Recovery when the time is right. Our external communications plan will reflect this engagement.
- 6.8. **Mission Zero: Next Steps**
- Complete baseline data capture to ensure we are basing targets and actions on robust, up-to-date information;
 - Discuss and agree our draft Net Zero targets;
 - To secure a consultant to complete an emissions audit and options appraisal across all our sites;
 - To agree a process for capturing and understanding COVID-19 impacts on our emissions, both for our Net Zero plan and for wider Green Recovery;
 - Finalise our internal communications and reporting arrangements. We want everyone across the organisation to understand how the Climate and Nature strands of work tie together, and to have effective monitoring and management channels to capture progress;
 - Refocus the work of the internal Climate Change Group;
 - Work with the Board to ensure ongoing effective engagement with our Net Zero plan.

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7. Conclusion

- 7.1. The COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly changed the focus of the National Park Authority. We are progressing multiple work streams in response, while also maintaining services and delivering of our strategic and operational plans where possible. In the coming weeks and months we expect the restarting of our operations, and recovery from the pandemic, to be our primary delivery focus as we continue to support our staff, communities, visitors, and the rural economy.

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