

National Park COVID-19 Recovery Plan and 2020/21 Annual Operating Plan Re-Prioritisation



Paper for decision

1. Purpose

- 1.1. The purpose of this paper is to present a National Park Recovery Plan incorporating a reprioritised 2020/21 Annual Operational Plan for approval. It sets out how we propose to adjust our delivery plans in response to COVID-19, as well as how we are considering the key risks through the pandemic. This sets out the delivery items we have put on hold, and the new items we are now planning to deliver to support the COVID-19 recovery

2. Recommendation

- 2.1. That Members **approve** the attached Recovery Plan and re-prioritised Annual Operating Plan 2020/21 (Appendix 1) and note the assessment of **Corporate risk** in light of COVID-19

3. Context

National Context

- 3.1. The Scottish Government has made clear that there should be a **'Green Recovery'** from the COVID-19 pandemic which addresses the twin challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss as central components of a more resilient and inclusive economy. Notwithstanding the challenges of moving out of the pandemic, the challenge of moving to a net zero carbon economy remains. Ensuring these considerations are embedded in all the actions we take in recovering from the health and economic crisis will reduce the impact of transition and avoid simply returning to pre-crisis business as usual in terms of emissions.
- 3.2. Much of National Park's economy is generated by its nature and landscapes which underpin key sectors particularly tourism. Investing in natural capital and nature-based solutions can drive inclusive economic development and can be the most cost-effective way of generating economic activity that will make our communities sustainable and more resilient. While the Covid-19 has caused a health and economic crisis there are some positive experiences of lockdown such as cleaner air, home working, a greater appreciation of nature and reduced business travel which may help post pandemic behaviour change in a way that supports climate action.

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- 3.3. In reprioritising our delivery plans it is important that we maintain our own focus on activities that support a national green recovery while enabling businesses and communities to return to a sustainable and resilient existence.
- 3.4. The National Park has seen significant growth in its tourism economy in recent years, which was £418M in value in 2018, representing 7,000 jobs. In normal years the National Park welcomes over 4 million visitors. The impact of lockdown has already been devastating coming just after the winter period when many businesses are gearing up for the main tourism season when most of their income is generated. As the pandemic and lockdown continues the prospect of businesses achieving income from the current year is diminishing. The current range of Government support schemes are preventing significant redundancies and businesses closing down for the moment. The Scottish Government has recognised that tourism and hospitality businesses are likely to be among the last sectors to be able to reopen and there is a need to look at ongoing support potentially into 2021 for many to survive. The realities of social distancing will be a challenge for businesses with smaller premises to achieve enough volume of business to be viable.
- 3.5. Given this fragility and the uncertainties of how long it will be until these businesses can operate again, there is a need to consider the role the National Park and its partners can play to support and invest in those things that will enable a rapid but safe recovery. We also need to consider what practical steps can be taken to achieve a green recovery.
- 3.6. The viability of many of the National Park's land based businesses and estates stems from diverse sources of income. Many businesses are supplemented or dependent on income from tourism and other sources to keep core land management activities valuable. Again, the increased impact on such income sources may affect capacity to undertake some of the land use and nature based investments that are crucial for the National Park to make its contribution. Securing and facilitating external funding for climate and nature based projects will be a key activity.
- 3.7. The economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis is expected to be most pronounced on young people leaving school or further/higher education with fewer job opportunities available in the short to medium term. It will be ever more important to consider how we ensure all of our activities include and achieve benefits for young people to improve their chances of employment as well as influence and shape our priorities.

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4. Our Annual Operational Plan 2020/21 and the new focus on recovery

4.1. We will continue to be guided by the longer term outcomes in our National Park Partnership Plan 2018-23. However, the new imperatives arising from the COVID19 pandemic and the Climate Emergency mean that some areas of activity have heightened priority. The 2020/21 Annual Operational Plan approved by the Board in March has four main headings;

1. Taking and inspiring action to address the global climate emergency and nature crisis
2. Enhancing our visitor experience, volunteering, and active living opportunities
3. Addressing the changing challenges posed by substantial visitor numbers
4. Continual improvement in delivering our core functions, including how we plan and use our resources, and meet our statutory requirements and duties

4.2. Appendix 1 sets out how the interruption of business continuity, the constraints of lockdown conditions on our organisation resources and capability and the new imperatives thrown up by the pandemic has impacted on our original intentions. The continuing uncertainty over budgets and income generation may impact on these further. The updates show those activities that are now delayed or are postponed from this financial year. Some activities are highlighted as recovery priorities as discussed below.

4.3. In the light of all of the additional work now required to manage the safe reopening of the National Park's facilities and to support wider recovery with national and local partners in a COVID-19 context it is proposed that an additional heading is added to our plans. Namely;

'Delivering and Facilitating a Safe and Green Recovery in the National Park'

Activities will include;

- We will develop a phased reopening of National Park Authority visitor sites, facilities and offices which ensures the public health of communities, visitors and staff is protected.
- We will work with and co-ordinate other public bodies, NGOs, communities, businesses and landowners and work with national bodies to work towards a safe and green recovery.
- We will work with business, agencies, local authorities, communities and other partners towards the recovery of our visitor economy.

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- We will ensure the continuity of our planning service has continued to operate to determine applications and provide advice to assist businesses as they seek to adapt to new operating guidance that supports safe re-opening in line with the Government's Route Map.
 - We will engage with and advise a range of national organisations and groups to help develop policies, guidance and support as Scotland moves through the four phases of the National Route Map.
- 4.4. The recovery from COVID19 and the continuing need to address the climate emergency by reducing emissions and supporting nature based solutions means that some of our planned activities now have heightened priority and urgency.
- 4.5. Taking and inspiring action to address the global climate emergency and nature crisis: While our work to create a **Mission Zero Route Map** for our own activity and that within the National Park Work has been disrupted we are continuing to focus on gathering of data and setting of overarching values and principles to inform the creation of targets and actions to move us towards Net Zero. The rapid move to remote working as a result of the COVID19 pandemic allows us to investigate what climate benefits from remote working and reduced travel could be retained in the long term to help reduce our emissions.
- 4.6. There is increasing priority being given to both public and private sector investment in nature-based solutions to deliver carbon reductions as a more sustainable and less expensive alternative to engineered solutions. Earlier this year the Scottish Government committed to a £20M investment this year and £250M over 10 years in **peatland restoration**. While there is uncertainty over what funding can now be made available in 2020/21 there is still a need to ramp up the capacity to deliver projects at scale over the coming years. Developing a programme approach to project delivery therefore has increased priority.
- 4.7. **Natural flood risk management** is recognised as a key means of building our resilience to climate change. Our **Strathard Project** is intended to be an exemplar of taking a catchment approach to identifying land use and nature based solutions alongside community regeneration and it will be a priority to reactivate this work.
- 4.8. Enhancing our visitor experience, volunteering, and active living opportunities: The COVID19 pandemic means that many of the aspirations for this year need to be put on hold because they either can't be delivered under the early phases of the Scottish Route Map or need to be reconsidered to take account of longer term implications e.g. aspects of our Active Park, Healthy People strategy may need to be reconsidered. However, some aspects of lockdown have led to people being more focussed on their permitted daily exercise and outdoor activity as well as getting used to travelling less. This gives a renewed impetus to continue our development of active travel networks. In addition there may be opportunities to

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work with local authorities to apply for '**Spaces for People**' funding to implement temporary active travel measures in some of our towns and villages to ensure people can walk, cycle and wheel whilst socially distancing.

- 4.9. We currently have a LEADER funded post to help explore with partners how best to bring investment for the future sustainability of the **West Highland Way**. Given the likelihood of a staycation dominated recovery for tourism, it can be expected that the West Highland Way will be under increasing demand and therefore strategically important. While there has been disruption to some planned activities it is important that we take advantage of the funded post to secure the necessary capital investment into route infrastructure.
- 4.10. The **Callander's Landscape** Partnership (CLP) plays an important role in recovery due to the investment it is bringing into the National Park. While lockdown has delayed progress on the construction projects, preparatory work continues in the background so that we can start construction as restrictions are lifted. We have added a specific line on CLP to the Annual Operational Plan.
- 4.11. Addressing the changing challenges posed by substantial visitor numbers. The recent relaxations on COVID19 restrictions on recreation activity and travel have brought visitor management issues back into sharp focus. The **National Park Safe Recovery Action Group** has rapidly implemented a range of traffic management measures. The likelihood of a 'staycation' dominated tourism recovery is expected to sustain these pressures in the future despite some markets taking longer to recover. While lockdown has disrupted planned work with partners and communities in the **East Loch Lomond Visitor Management Group** to sustainably reduce visitor pressures, there is now an opportunity to capitalise on recent collaborative work to deliver longer term solutions incorporating other locations also currently under pressure.
- 4.12. Continual improvement in delivering our core functions, including how we plan and use our resources, and meet our statutory requirements and duties: There are a number of planned activities that are particularly critical to our organisation and National Park recovery. As part of new provisions in the planning system, work has been progressed to develop our thinking to develop new **Regional Spatial Strategies** aligned to our National Park Partnership Plan. This work can help guide opportunities for new investment in the area as the economy recovers. The pandemic and resultant closure of our site and facilities has meant a significant loss of income critical to our operations. There is a heightened need to identify external funding resources to sustain our projects and services into the future. Our recent and ongoing investment in our ICT infrastructure have been key to delivering business continuity during lockdown facilitating a relatively smooth transition to

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remote working. Given that these new ways of working will continue for the foreseeable future it is crucial that we continue to invest in cloud based technologies to increase functionality and productivity.

4.13. The Board are therefore requested to approve our revised Recovery and Operational Plan for the remainder of 2020/21 as at Appendix 1 attached to this report.

5. COVID-19 Corporate Risk

5.1. The pandemic has significantly changed the risks we face as an organisation. It has also changed the pace of change in the risks we face.

5.2. Our June Board meeting is when we would usually bring an updated version of the Corporate Risk Register for review. Given the current unprecedented circumstances we have instead focussed our attention specifically on the immediate COVID-19 risks facing the National Park Authority.

5.3. The table below sets out our top six COVID-19 risks, and actions we are taking to mitigate these.

| | RISK | MITIGATIONS |
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| 1 | Health and Safety / Illness Our staff, volunteers, or visitors are exposed to COVID-19 in the workplace or at a visitor site, resulting in them becoming unwell or dying, or passing the virus on to others who become unwell. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Closely follow Government guidance on measures that must be implemented to protect from COVID-19 including staff working from home wherever possible- Development and implementation of health and safety policies for COVID-19 at our workplaces and sites including physical distancing, hygiene, and cleaning regimes- Clear communication on the steps individuals must take to protect against COVID-19, including staying home, handwashing, and self-isolating after developing symptoms |
| 2 | Health and Safety / Staff wellbeing Staff wellbeing degrades as a result of the pandemic, including the mental health effects of living with the restrictions in place, difficulties with | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Frequent and proactive communication from National Park leadership about our |

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| | home working set-ups, or adapting to new ways of working remotely. | <p>expectations of staff and the support available to them</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognition that delivery and productivity won't be as previously expected - Flexible HR policies to support those affected by the virus, those with caring responsibilities, or other individual circumstances |
| 3 | <p>Financial</p> <p>The economic shut down leads to decreases in income from tenants, user charges, and planning application fees. Costs don't decrease by the same amount (or even increase) resulting in a significant budget deficit and therefore cash flow issues</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frequent reforecast and monitoring of our budget in order to understand the range of possible outcomes - Additional caution on new uncommitted spend - Identification and use of income support measures, including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme - Engagement with our Scottish Government sponsor team to explain the budget challenges and the severity of the potential impacts |
| 4 | <p>Strategic / Visitor pressures</p> <p>A surge in visitor numbers to the National Park when lockdown restrictions are lifted leads to irresponsible behaviour and causes environmental degradation, pressures on communities, and safety implications.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A strong communications plan reflecting how to act responsibly, including in line with Government guidance on travel restrictions - Consideration of a phased reopening plan for visitor sites when it is safe and appropriate to do so - Close working with local delivery partners to ensure joined-up approaches across the National Park |
| 5 | <p>Strategic / Stakeholder relationships</p> <p>The new ways of working during the pandemic, combined with the volume of stakeholder communications required to keep in touch with all relevant groups, as well as the potential for divergence in opinion on key decisions, results in</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased and more frequent senior level engagement with key stakeholder groups and networks - Regular communication updates from the National Park to specific stakeholder groups |

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| | degrading stakeholder relationships and therefore less ability to work collaboratively and in partnership on achieving outcomes. | - Strategic monitoring of planned stakeholder engagement to inform approach and key messages |
| 6 | Delivery / Business continuity Key systems or staff that the National Park is dependent on for business continuity (eg IT or Finance personnel and systems) are unavailable, for example due to network failures or staff illness. Business functioning and delivery is impacted. | - Identification of key dependencies with mitigation and back-up measures put in place - Consideration of the existing Business Continuity Plan in the context of the current ways of working with new measures added where practical |

5.4. We will continue to keep these risks and mitigations under review and adjust them as necessary.

6. Conclusion

6.1. The pandemic has led to a significant shift in focus for us. As a result, we have reprioritised our 2020/21 Annual Operational Plan including putting some delivery items on hold while starting new items to support a safe and green COVID-19 recovery.

Appendix 1 – Revised Annual Operational Plan 2020/21

Author and Executive Sponsor – Gordon Watson, CEO