

# National Park Authority Board Meeting

Agenda Item 11

## CEO Update

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### *Paper for discussion*

#### 1. Purpose

- 1.1. The purpose of this paper is to provide the Board with important updates on significant issues affecting the operating environment of the National Park Authority.

#### 2. Recommendation

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

#### 3. Scottish Government

- 3.1. The Scottish Government has announced that its draft budget for 2021-22 will not be published until 28 January 2021. This later date has been identified following the UK Government's decision to postpone its Autumn Budget until an unspecified date in the New Year. Members will recall that there was a similar delay in announcing the 2020-21 Scottish budget for similar reasons. Prior to this the normal cycle was for such an announcement to be made prior to the Christmas break allowing the fourth quarter of the financial year to undertake budget planning aligned to Annual Operating Plan priorities.
- 3.2. Given the pressures experienced during 2020 both on finances and organisation resources generally, the lateness of the budget announcement and confirmation of the National Park Authority's Grant in Aid settlement so close to the new 2021-22 financial year brings considerable uncertainty and risk. This is heightened by the anticipation of another expected lengthy and busy visitor season as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to point to a staycation dominated early season at least. Submissions to the Scottish Government have highlighted that current services and capability cannot be sustained without a significant uplift in resource Grant-in-Aid. As highlighted in the Finance paper elsewhere on this agenda the Scottish Government has provided a welcome additional £400k Grant in Aid for this year in recognition of the exceptional financial pressures brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and the extra costs of providing safe visitor facilities. Planning for next year is already underway but is being based on a number of scenarios including the significant implications of no increase.
- 3.3. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance has highlighted the need to prioritise resources as effectively as possible to drive the country's economic recovery from COVID-19 while also managing the ongoing impact of the virus. The delay will also allow account to be taken of the position on EU exit deal on devolved matters. The National Park Authority will continue to highlight the important role played in

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supporting wellbeing through safe access to the outdoors while also supporting a green recovery from the pandemic. Board members will be kept updated as further details emerge in the New Year.

### 4. Scottish Land Commission Report – Regional Land Use Partnerships

- 4.1. National Park Partnership Plans are one of the established examples of trying to take a regional view on how to promote positive land uses and management that achieves benefits for nature and the climate as well as sustain viable land businesses. However, these plans do not link directly to how land management and agricultural support schemes operate and prioritise funding which largely operate to nationally set priorities.
- 4.2. The proposal for Regional Land Use Partnerships was first set out in Scotland's Land Use Strategy in 2016 and the Climate Change Act in 2019 brought renewed ambition to the proposal. Land use and land use change is recognised as key to delivering Scotland and the UK's climate change targets for 2030 and 2040 and Regional Land Use Partnerships are seen as pivotal to driving and delivering on this ambition making a just transition to a net zero economy.
- 4.3. It is welcome to see the growing recognition that the regional scale is the most appropriate at which the land use opportunities, options and priorities can be identified, the implications for others can be considered, the synergies with others can be realised and the accountability for choices can be transparent and accessible. National Parks are already recognised as the most established example in Scotland of the benefits of regional scale land use planning and leadership.
- 4.4. The Scottish Government recently commissioned the Scottish Land Commission to recommend how Regional Land Use Partnerships might work. The recommendations have now been published and are very timely in the context both of urgency to achieve climate targets through land use change and the need to make more of our land in driving economic recovery and renewal and community resilience. In the coming year a new Land Use Strategy will be published, as will the next National Planning Framework. At the same time Scotland is shaping new approaches to rural funding following EU Exit. This is therefore a significant opportunity to establish a more open, joined up and locally responsive approach to land use decisions, funding and delivery. The expectations of community empowerment and the 'place principle' have significantly strengthened. A new Planning Act in the meantime has introduced Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Place Plans and Scotland's climate targets have introduced a new urgency.
- 4.5. The Commission has made four main recommendations to Ministers:

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- Use the partnerships to drive a collaborative approach to land use decision making in the public interest and to prioritise and target delivery of public funding to achieve land use objectives
- Set up around 12-15 Partnerships covering all of Scotland, connecting urban and rural Scotland based on the geography of planning authorities
- Ensure the partnerships comprise an appointed board so as to be accountable and sufficiently independent
- Establish the first partnerships in 2021 to test approaches and ensure partnerships are operational across all of Scotland ahead of the next Climate Change Plan (2023-2024) to meet the urgency of climate change targets.

More detailed advice is given in respect of the purpose and functions, geography governance, and implementation. Both National Parks in Scotland have continued to offer opportunities to pilot this approach and it is hoped that further discussions may take place in 2021 on how this might progress. The next iteration of National Park Partnership Plans could be a vehicle for new Regional Land Use Frameworks and establishing stronger links to Local Development Plans.

### 5. National Visitor Management Strategy Steering Group

- 5.1. Following a presentation given to a national summit chaired by Cabinet Secretary for Tourism, Fergus Ewing following the significant visitor pressures seen across parts of rural Scotland post-lockdown, the recommendations made on the need for a national response are now being taken forward. Both National Park CEOs are part of a National Steering Group chaired by VisitScotland CEO Malcolm Roughead tasked with delivering a world class approach to Visitor Management that protects our environment, respects our communities, enhances the experience of our visitors and supports a thriving tourism sector. Three working groups have been established looking at Communication and Education, Infrastructure and Investment and Operational Management. National Parks are involved in all three and are leading the Infrastructure and Investment Group. The remits and priorities for each group are being further developed and it is intended that recommendations on priorities will be made to Ministers early in the New Year. The experience of National Parks in visitor management issues are seen as invaluable to help advise on similar issues now arising in other popular rural destinations less equipped to deal with the new pressures arising out of the COVID affected staycation visitor numbers and behaviours as well as longer term issues.

### 6. Active Park Healthy People

- 6.1. Members will recall approving our Active Park, Healthy People strategy for consultation in December 2019. With a successful consultation process being completed earlier this year it had been the intention to bring a final draft for approval

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to the June Board meeting including a more detailed Delivery Plan. This would set out guiding principles and priority partner initiatives which enable more people to enjoy that National Park sustainably and responsibly. The core principles around Inclusion, Health and Well-being and the Global Climate Emergency remain, however we and stakeholders all agree that for the Delivery Plan to have the full value we all wish then it is appropriate to take a pause through 2020 and consider how the final draft can best focus energies and funding as we all emerge out of COVID-19. To this end the project team will be re-engaging with stakeholders this winter and work towards a final draft being presented at Board in June 2021. It is vital that the Plan reflects the changes and pressures, on people and places, we have all witnessed though this year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has an opportunity to play an important role in setting out visitor management, recreation provision and mental well-being initiatives which have been brought into particularly sharp focus this year.

### 7. Community Partnership/Countryside Trust Review

- 7.1. Members will recall that a review has been jointly commissioned with the Community Partnership and Countryside Trust to consider the most effective operating model for these independent organisations. As the primary funder of both organisations the National Park Authority requires to ensure that these organisations are able to make an effective contribution to achieve relevant outcomes in our National Park Partnership Plan. This is also in the context of increasing pressure on established funding sources for both organisations, and the National Park Authority's budgets in particular.
- 7.2. The review has concluded and Community Partnership and Countryside Trust Board members are now working through the recommendations which if followed would result in significant changes. The National Park Authority continues to provide support where appropriate while awaiting the full conclusion of these discussions and will be seeking to facilitate agreed changes to be as smooth as possible. Once each organisation has formalised its position, and agreed implementation steps, an further update will be provided to Board Members.

### 8. West Highland Way 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

- 8.1. To coincide with its 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the National Park Authority and partner route management local authorities developed the 'West Highland Way: a more sustainable future' project and successfully secured LEADER programme funding to take it forward. The project aims to use the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the route opening as an opportunity to help identify a more sustainable future for its management. While some of the original intentions have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic a lot has still been achieved through alternative activities, including;

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- Regular engagement with over 150 WHW businesses has been achieved during 2020, starting with two workshops held in March and followed by email communication, video calls and a business Facebook group.
- As it was not possible to hold a public event this year as originally planned, a virtual exhibition was launched, following a public campaign over the summer, to celebrate the WHW's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary on 6 October ([www.westhighlandway40.org](http://www.westhighlandway40.org))
- From 6-22 October, the 40<sup>th</sup> virtual exhibition website received 2,351 unique visitors, with 6,908-page views.
- Website figures for October (for the main website [www.westhighlandway.org](http://www.westhighlandway.org)) were 14.8% higher than in 2019 at 36,324 visits which shows the effect that the anniversary celebrations had on web traffic. This is the first month in 2020 that web visits have been higher than 2019.
- The Facebook post on 6 October relating to the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary reached tens of thousands of people (22.1k).
- Substantial media coverage was achieved, particularly on BBC Radio Scotland including on Out of Doors, Mornings

Work continues to identify ways to fundraise for ongoing route maintenance and to engage businesses to support ways to increase benefits from the continued and increasing popularity of the route.

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