

# Community Support and Engagement Update

## Agenda Item 12

### National Park Authority Board Meeting

Monday 15<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Paper for information

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#### 1. Purpose

- 1.1. To provide an update on the conclusion of a joint review of the role of the Community Partnership and the Countryside Trust and outline an updated approach to our support to, and engagement with, our communities in light of these changes.

#### 2. Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to –

- Note this report
- Record their thanks to the Board and staff of the Community Partnership, recognising the many years of work supporting the Park's communities and leaving a strong legacy of engaged and empowered communities .

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

- 3.1. Rural Development Outcome 13 - Community Empowerment; including Priority 13.1, supporting the capacity of community organisations; Priority 13.2, supporting community-led action; Priority 13.3, supporting partnership working.

- 3.2. Our work with community organisations contributes to Priorities 5, 6 and 8 in our 5-Year Plan to by supporting placemaking and sustainable communities; maximising best value opportunities through partnership working, community engagement and learning.

#### **4. Background**

- 4.1. The National Park Authority has an established programme of support to communities which has changed and evolved since the National Park was designated in 2002 reflecting the wider operating environment, capacity and priorities of both communities and the Park Authority. At the core of this work is empowering and supporting community organisations to have the capacity and skills to deliver their own identified priorities which benefit communities and the wider National Park.
- 4.2. There is a well-established network of Community Development Trusts, Community Councils and other third sector organisations across the Park. Our communities are very active and have an impressive track record of successful project delivery over the years. This includes delivering small hydro schemes, new village halls, new footpaths and managing community owned assets such as shops, a pontoon, a mausoleum, petrol station and recently a pub. There are also a small number of Development Trusts who employ a member of staff to support their work in this respect. While the Park Authority's support to individual projects varies, since the establishment of the National Park the programme has helped support and enable the overall capacity and ability for communities to deliver such projects.
- 4.3. Empowering communities to progress their own activity and action has multiple benefits. For example, a number of the above projects secure an income stream to be used to support and grow more community lead activity. A great example is Lochgoil's hydro scheme whereby the income generated from this is used to fund other community led projects identified in their community action plan, for example the creation of a large community garden on an area of vacant land. This site is now used by the community for gatherings and events, for a shared plant and food growing space and it connects with a newly created riverside walkway. All of this activity was initiated and led by the community itself. This characterises success and the kind of local delivery we seek to support; active communities, taking local action, stimulating social enterprise, generating income and investing in the National Park's places and people.
- 4.4. In terms of support to community organisations, our focus has historically been with the 17 Community Development Trusts across the Park which were set up in the early days of the National Park through a Community Futures programme.
- 4.5. There are also 22 Community Councils in the Park; their governance/capacity is supported by Local Authorities but we also engage with them on a great many projects and support their work to compliment what is provided by Local Authorities.

They have statutory responsibilities to identify priorities, represent local views and inform development planning and planning decisions.

- 4.6. The Community Partnership, a registered charity, was established in 2003 and received core, project funding and in-kind support from the National Park Authority. Since its establishment, the Partnership has performed a vital role and provided much needed support over a period when very little support of this nature was available to National Park communities. The Community Futures Programme helped communities produce community action plans, which in turn helped them to provide evidence of need and attract project funding. Significant project delivery stemmed from these action plans, as noted earlier. From these also arose the creation of Community Development Trusts to which the Community Partnership supported their establishment and ongoing role delivering for communities, and also National Park aims and outcomes. The annual community organisation event – the Gathering - was always a well-attended and much loved event that brought communities across the Park together to network and connect, as well as the local area networks held in Cowal, Loch Lomond and The Trossachs. All of this networking was supported by regular communications and training opportunities.
- 4.7. As well as support to communities direct, the Partnership has delivered many Park-wide projects including Community Futures Goes Green, Paths in the Park, the Skills Partnership, Strathard Initiative community engagement, WW1: Service, Spirit and Sacrifice, Gaelic Bible and most recently the Social Enterprise Hub. Over this last year the Partnership supported the Covid-19 response to communities in and around the National Park.

## **5. Review of the Community Partnership and the Countryside Trust**

- 5.1. In recent years, there have been significant changes to national priorities and policies, the funding landscape and the local operating environment in which capacity, development and funding support to communities is provided. There is also a refreshed and urgent focus on the Climate Emergency, biodiversity and nature and the Scottish Government's commitment towards a fair and green recovery from Covid-19.
- 5.2. Set against this context, and for the Park Authority in seeking to ensure any continued potential financial support for these organisations would deliver on our Outcomes an independent review was commissioned. This review was overseen by a small group of Board Members from each organisation along with the Park Authority's Director of Rural Development and Planning.
- 5.3. The review assessed the opportunities for both organisations going forward, considering viability, funding options, governance and clarity of their purpose. The review identified a small number of options and concluded that forming one single charity from the two, with an amended or refocused purpose on green recovery, the climate and nature emergency. After considering the recommendations from the 2020 review, there was agreement that a single charity would be the best way

forward. The Boards of the Community Partnership and the Countryside Trust have therefore negotiated a solution that will see the closure of the Community Partnership as of the 31 March 2021 and strengthening of the Countryside Trust to build on its existing work in and for communities supported by the Park Authority.

5.4. Whilst the closure of such an established organisation was a difficult decision for the Community Partnership Board, and one not one taken lightly, the journey taken to reaching this was one in which we shared, alongside the Countryside Trust. The outcome achieved, in which the Countryside Trust will now work with and support communities to address the challenges we all face on climate emergency and nature loss, is a timely evolution of community support and testament to the solid foundations that have been put in place by the Community Partnership's dedicated commitment and support to National Park communities over the years. Without this, our communities would undoubtedly not have the requisite skills, capacity, knowledge and ability to work with others to tackle these urgent and significant issues.

## **6. The Countryside Trust**

6.1. The Loch Lomond and The Trossachs Countryside Trust was set up in 2012 and is a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. While its initial purpose was centred on the funding secured from Scotgold's planning approval for the Cononish Gold and Silver Mine near Tyndrum, its work has broadened out over the years into health and active travel. Addressing the climate and biodiversity emergency is now the single most important issue driving its work. It has specific aims around enhancing the National Park's biodiversity; increasing resilience of communities to climate change through nature-based solutions; reducing reliance on carbon and improving the health and wellbeing of both residents and visitors. From April 2021 the Countryside Trust will take on an increased role that includes improved communications with communities on these topics and closer working with community groups in achieving positive actions to address the climate and biodiversity emergency.

6.2. The National Park Authority's support and funding to the Countryside Trust will be critical for it to grow and establish in its new form over the next three years as it seeks to establish a viable business model going forward. The Trust also now receives an annual payment of £25,000 from Scotgold (total figure over the production lifetime of the mine is £425,000), as per the Cononish planning permission / Section 75 Agreement. This agreement requires funds are used for visitor and conservation projects in the Strathfillan Community Area and across the National Park.

6.3. The Countryside Trust employs a Transformation Director and staff who deliver projects that are part-funded through other sources, and match fund the Park Authority's contributions, which currently include Walk in the Park (the thriving health walk programme) and an Active Travel initiative which encourages and supports the development of cycle friendly communities. There is also a pipeline of new projects

in development or in a pre-start phase. One of the staff members of the Community Partnership has recently been appointed to a new communications and support position within the Countryside Trust.

- 6.4. All Community Development Trusts and Community Councils in the National Park will be eligible to join the Trust as full members. The Countryside Trust will also seek to have a minimum of three community-based Directors, out of a total of nine Directors overall.

## **7. Review of National Park Authority community support and engagement**

- 7.1. The review of the Community Partnership and the Countryside Trust has also provided an opportunity to consider how the Park Authority's outcomes can best be achieved through our work with community organisations. During this past year there has also been a much greater focus on communication and engagement with our communities, as one of our key stakeholders, in response to the wider collective response to the issues as a result of the pandemic. New online, digital engagement methods have been trialled and the strengthening of existing stakeholder approaches is being developed. For example, the virtual Park wide and place based stakeholder forums.

### *Community support*

- 7.2. Support to our community organisations for capacity building (retaining and attracting volunteers, skills, training, governance etc) community action and place planning, acquiring and managing land and assets, and operational or project funding is provided by a number of local and national organisations. This includes the Park Authority.
- 7.3. Local Authorities and Third Sector Interfaces (such as Stirling Voluntary Enterprise and Argyll and Bute Third Sector Interface) are the main community support agencies that are funded to provide support to community groups and the third sector. Primarily this is through the Community Planning Partnerships, which can help communities influence and deliver services that support social, health, wellbeing and economic outcomes. The focus of these is very much on areas of disadvantage and deprivation.
- 7.4. The role of the Park Authority has always been focused on the National Park's aim to promote sustainable social and economic development of the communities of the area. This is reflected in our current Partnership Plan Outcomes and Priorities as highlighted earlier in section 3. While the support landscape available has changed significantly since the Park's establishment, there has remained a need to ensure the National Park's communities can connect with the support available, access the opportunities and benefits that comes from being within a National Park and also provide tailored support that responds to the more unique rural issues and challenges faced in comparison to the more urban communities outwith the Park.

7.5. The core of the support available is not going to change significantly, but we will now have more direct contact with community organisations instead of the Community Partnership and will have some increased staff time for this. Staff will continue to develop their understanding of communities' needs and priorities, as well as coordinate support and advice by working across National Park Authority teams, offering funding opportunities through our Grant Scheme, and by working with the local authorities and other agencies and organisations who provide more specialist support. As well as continuing our ongoing engagement with communities and other stakeholders around visitor management and other issues, we will continue to support communities to prepare their own community place plans and are currently working with Killin, Strathfillan and Balquhidder, Lochearnhead and Strathyre in this regard.

7.6. By way of re-cap, our work with community organisations will include the following main areas -

- Fund and support the Countryside Trust to scope and develop community-led projects, knowledge-sharing and networking in relation to climate change, sustainable travel, biodiversity and nature.
- Support communities to prepare their own community place plans
- Facilitate joint working on shared issues and support a stronger approach towards co-production of place based plans and strategies through stakeholder engagement forums.
- Strengthen direct links with Community Councils, Development Trusts and special interest third sector organisations
- Provide updates on policies, plans and operations
- Organise statutory consultations
- Support and help fund community-led projects
- Signpost to organisational capacity-building support.

#### *Community stakeholder engagement*

7.7. We are reviewing engagement across all key stakeholder groups, including communities, to put in place a model to trial in 2021/22 that is mutually beneficial for everyone, supports each audience group and also creates scheduled opportunities to bring stakeholders together where necessary.

7.8. This review is timely as it can respond to the changes with the closure of the Community Partnership, the visitor management challenges highlighted during last year's summer season and feedback received via a survey issued to Community Councils and Community Development Trusts in October 2020 on a range of suggested engagement options.

7.9. Feedback to this is currently still being analysed however 83% of respondents considered more regular virtual engagement between the Park Authority and their community organisation would be mutually beneficial. The majority of respondents felt that this engagement should be a mixture of both Park-wide and specific area-

based engagement opportunities, covering a range of topics and particularly support for a visitor management focus. Based on this feedback we trialled an area based approach to visitor management engagement in January, splitting the Park into different areas to bring together landowners, communities, businesses and partners operating in the areas to talk about visitor management planning for the coming season. Feedback on these meetings will be used to help shape plans going forward.

7.10. The survey results will help inform thinking on how place-based and/or possibly Park-wide engagement could be enhanced during 2021/22. There is a role for Board Members, particularly locally elected, and all Park Authority teams to contribute to this with a particular role for the Communities and Communications teams to lead on the establishment and co-ordinated implementation of this.

7.11. Initial thinking is that place based forums could be hosted bi-annually or quarterly and be used to engage on specific topics or issues – to be agreed jointly between us and communities as a pre-planned programme for the year ahead. This should ensure a manageable programme for the Park Authority as well as communities. It is hoped that this approach will also facilitate stronger joint working, understanding and input from communities into some of our newly arising work streams such as engagement on local Visitor Management solutions, our future Regional Spatial Strategy, piloting a Regional Land Use Partnership, the next Local Development Plan and sharing learning on Community Place Plans.

## 8. Next steps

8.1. In light of the context set out above it is intended that a revitalised programme of community support work is undertaken by the National Park Communities Team. It is intended that the Communities Team works across Park Authority teams to support a reframed programme of work focussed on agreeing mechanisms for engagement with and between communities, identifying community capacity support needs, supporting communities to prepare community place plans, improving links with Community Councils and Community Development Trusts, reviewing community empowerment procedures and protocols and developing strategic arrangements with partners.

8.2. The new programme of work will ensure we deliver best value by targeting our resources more efficiently and through strengthening partnership working to maximise access to support provided by other agencies or local authorities to avoid duplication and deliver a more coordinated approach to community support.

**Author(s):** Susan Brooks, Development Planning & Communities Manager  
Stuart Mearns, Director of Rural Development and Planning

**Executive Sponsor:** Stuart Mearns, Director of Rural Development and Planning

**Board Sponsor:** Bob Darracott