

Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park Authority

Annual Report 2019 – 2020

Welcome

This year's annual report is being presented amidst the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. In some ways, looking back to when the financial year started in April 2019 now seems like a different world. COVID-19 has impacted almost everything we do. But reviewing the full year of delivery prior to this still provides us with the opportunity to reflect on our recent successes as a National Park, and the strength of our work alongside partners and stakeholders to conserve and enhance Loch Lomond and The Trossachs.

Our work is grounded in our National Park Partnership Plan (NPPP) 2018-23. During 2019/20 we assessed the first year's progress against the NPPP's indicators of success. We made good progress in many areas, including peatland restoration, outdoor learning, affordable housing, volunteering, the visitor economy, and community-identified projects. Challenges remain to achieve our targets in other areas such as woodland creation, designated site features, water body condition, and sustainable places. In November, we brought partners and stakeholders together to discuss how we can make more progress on these together. As we move through 2020/21 and beyond, we will work with partners to continue achieve the NPPP outcomes. In doing so we will have a particular focus on a green recovery from COVID-19.

Over the year we met a key milestone with the third year of the camping management byelaws. At the end of the year we reported to Scottish Ministers on the impact the byelaws have had on the visitor and camping experience, and on the environment given previously seen pressures. Our report included several recommendations including continued education and engagement, further development of low cost camping options, and targeting interventions at the specific areas where some negative impacts still persist. Now that the report has been fully endorsed by Scottish Ministers we will work to move forward with these recommendations.

A high profile Major Planning application at the West Riverside site in Balloch also took centre stage over the course of the year attracting widespread interest and comment. It was a significant cross-team effort as our Planning team was assisted by teams across the organisation to assess and handle the application. Though the application was ultimately withdrawn, we are proud of how our staff worked through the process to produce a comprehensive report and recommendation and plan a significant public Hearing, and we will look to build on this work as we take forward new applications from across the National Park.

The main body of this annual report provides further information on our other key achievements over the year. We completed our Trees & Woodlands Strategy, consulted on a new Core Paths Plan and Outdoor Recreation Plan, and made substantial improvements to visitor facilities around Loch Lomond using Rural Tourism Infrastructure funding. We also improved our organisational effectiveness through significant IT upgrades, supporting our Board, growing our volunteering, and reducing our carbon emissions.

The end of the year was met with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As with much of the global response, we had to react and adapt rapidly and in unprecedented ways. Ultimately, this resulted in a complete shutdown of all of our operations within the National Park in late March 2020 while continuing to deliver some essential and statutory functions through new remote ways of working. We are grateful to our staff who worked tirelessly to take the steps required to support communities and businesses in the Park, and to our partners and other stakeholders who have worked alongside us to cooperatively address the challenges we face. As we move through the coming year we will do everything we can to deliver visitor services and facilities safely while supporting a green recovery within the National Park, including renewing our efforts to achieve net zero carbon emissions in the coming years.

Gordon Watson
Chief Executive Officer

James Stuart
Convener

Our mission

...is to be the vital force in protecting and enhancing this iconic National Park.

Our aims

The National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 sets out four aims:

- To conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area
- To promote the sustainable use of the natural resources of the area
- To promote understanding and enjoyment (including enjoyment in the form of recreation) of the special qualities of the area by the public
- To promote sustainable social and economic development of the communities of the area.

Our long term vision

We want the National park to be an internationally-renowned landscape where...

Conservation and Land Management

Nature, heritage and land are valuable assets, managed and enhanced to provide multiple benefits for all.

Visitor Experience

There is a high quality, authentic experience for people from all backgrounds. There are many opportunities to enjoy recreation activities and appreciate the area's outstanding natural and cultural heritage within an internationally renowned landscape.

Rural Development

Businesses and communities thrive and people live and work sustainably in a high quality environment.

Our plans and priorities

We contribute to the national outcomes and strategic objectives of the Scottish Government. The extent to which we contribute to Scottish Government's priorities and outcomes is fundamental to our own success as a National Park Authority in delivering for Scotland.

The 2019/20 ['Protecting Scotland's Future'](#) programme sets out the Scottish Government's expectations for Scotland.

Our [National Park Partnership Plan \(2018-2023\)](#) describes the vision and outcomes for the whole National Park area and contributions required from many different organisations over a five year period to help achieve our shared vision for the National Park.

[Our 5-Year Plan \(2018-2023\)](#) expresses the business objectives of the National Park Authority and outlines how we will contribute to the National Park Partnership Plan and to the broader National Park aims.

The Annual Operational Plan (2019/20) describes the specific business priorities and objectives for the year.

Highlights of the Year

Conservation and Land Management

Growing and Protecting our Trees and Woodlands: In October our Board approved the new National Park Trees & Woodlands Strategy, which was publically launched later in the year by Mairi Gougeon, Minister of Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment. The strategy will enable trees and woodlands to play a key role in tackling the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis in the National Park. It covers all scales and types of woodland management from small-scale tree planting for landscape and amenity to farm woodland, native woodland and productive conifer schemes of all sizes. A key priority is enhancing and increasing native woodland within the National Park.

Wild Park Action Programme: Together with our partners and through the Wild Park steering and work groups we progressed targeted invasive non-native species control, applied for and received external funding for habitat improvements, and undertook a water opportunity mapping workshop for stakeholders in National Park.

Development & Natural Heritage: We have achieved good conservation outcomes from development, including landscape and biodiversity gains from proposals such as those at Cameron House where a Land Management Plan will deliver benefits for the wider estate. We continue to ensure good restoration is delivered for buildings and infrastructure, including access tracks for run of river hydro schemes and at the Cononish Gold Mine. We have also carefully considered the natural heritage impacts of proposals in sensitive locations.

Peatland restoration: Over the year we increased our capacity to deliver peatland restoration within the National Park. This included developing several projects that will be taken forward in future years, quantifying the peat condition within the National Park, and purchasing an aerial drone that will assist trained staff in surveying peatland areas.

Visitor Experience

Your Park Camping Management: We marked the third year of camping management byelaws. The numbers of people camping within a permit area or National Park campsite increased by 10% to 28,000, including more than 5,000 children. We received positive feedback from campsite users, including 92% who said they were likely to recommend staying in a National Park permit area and 96% who said they would recommend staying in one of our campsites. In March 2020 the Board approved our three-year report to Scottish Ministers outlining the effectiveness of the camping management measures. The report and its recommendations were subsequently accepted by the Scottish Government.

Path Creation and Restoration: A total of 12km of paths was developed or significantly improved this year. This included 500 metres of new off-road path created from Callander Craggs car park to Bracklinn Falls car park. The project involved three new timber footbridges, signage and information boards and is part of the overall plan to encourage people to walk to the Falls from the town centre. We also supported partners in the delivery of just under 10km of upland path work as part of The Mountains and the People Project and 1.8km of shared use path as phase 4 of the Loch Earn Railway Path Project.

Active Places, Healthy People: We consulted on a new Outdoor Recreation Plan, entitled 'Active Park, Healthy People'. The proposed plan aims to leverage the benefits of outdoor recreation across multiple areas, including health, equality, and economic gains, as well as carbon reduction through active travel and more sustainable forms of transport. We received 82 responses to the consultation, which included high quality input from individuals and organisations. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are reviewing the timeline for finalisation of the plan.

Visitor Research: The field work for our 12-month park-wide survey commenced on schedule in May 2019 but had to cease six weeks early in March 2020 due to COVID-19. The total sample size is 2,265 instead of the target 2,400 but the data on visitor profile, behaviour and feedback was collected at 23 locations and is representative of all areas across the National Park. We are undertaking a re-analysis of data from the 2015/16 research to be able to ensure valid comparisons of the 11 month data 2019/20.

Go Swim Loch Lomond: In August 2019, working with a new delivery partner and other national agencies, we held the Go Swim Loch Lomond event at the Duncan Mills Memorial Slipway in Balloch. The event attracted 822 participants and 2500 spectators. Participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with 77% of participants rating the event as Excellent, and a further 20% rating it as Good.

Rural Development

Callander's Landscape: This major three-year programme of 20 diverse-yet-interlinked projects, being delivered collaboratively with community, agency and other partners, accomplished substantial progress throughout 2019. Match-funding aims are being met, engagement targets exceeded and the scope of several projects expanded. Key challenges remain around some capital works including the Falls of Leny Visitor Destination, future management and legal arrangements. Due to Covid-19 delays, a potential programme extension is being discussed with National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Development Activity: Good progress was made towards delivering the vision and strategy set out in our Local Development Plan (2017-2021). Examples include:

- *Enabling more young people to have a future living and working in the Park:* 63 new homes were built, with developments in Callander and Balloch providing 53 affordable flats and houses. Planning permission was also granted for 182 new homes of which 97 will be affordable homes.

- *High Quality Visitor Accommodation in a range of locations:* We approved nine self-catering units, 196 bed spaces and 19 stances for pod-style static caravans. The rise in the number of approvals for bed spaces includes the extensions to Cameron House and The Loch Lomond Arms Hotel.
- *Thriving economically active rural economy and communities:* Planning permission was granted for a variety of new developments, such as bike hire, an art and sculpture studio and expansion of smokehouse storage space. In Tyndrum, construction commenced on the Cononish Gold Mine.
- *Safeguarding our precious natural and cultural assets:* Through our planning service, enhancements to biodiversity were secured at a total of 26 new development sites. Four hydro and three biomass applications were approved and there was a significant increase in the extent of new development that included low and zero carbon technology.
- *More active travel options and off road connections:* 3km of new paths were constructed and a further 8.4km of paths were approved, providing enhancements to local and strategic path networks.

An Excellent Organisation

Climate Change: The national and international context for climate change action evolved rapidly over the course of 2019-20 with increasing commitments by governments and leaders around the world. We began work on our Mission Zero Route map which will set out how we will deliver net zero emissions for the organisation. In the meantime, we continued delivery against our existing Climate Change Action Plan. This included a 12% reduction in emissions over the past year. Other key achievements include increasing our vehicle fleet to 10 electric vehicles and 2 hybrids (representing 37% of our fleet), adding to our climate change educational resources, and adding sustainability provisions to our ICT policy to enable active decision making around equipment use and need.

Digital Engagement: In 2019/20, the National Park website was visited more than 891,000 times, with pages on the website being viewed more than 2.4 million times. Visits were in line with 2018/19 performance for most of the year, however in February and March 2020 we saw a significant drop in website traffic (visits down -37% year-on-year) as the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent UK lockdown came into effect, leaving overall visits up +0.5% versus 2018/19. Throughout the year most website visits still came from the UK (76%), followed by the USA (7%), Germany (3%) and many other European countries. Our social media channels continue to be important ways to connect with our audiences, with our Facebook, Twitter and Instagram channels reaching more than 8.3 million people in 2019/20. Significant effort was put into the development of our Instagram channel, which has seen a 72% increase in followers on the previous year.

Resilient and effective ICT services: We progressed and completed year two of our strategy to improve the effectiveness and resilience of our ICT equipment and services. This included hardware and software upgrades, moving to the latest operating systems available, and rolling out a mobile device management system. We also moved all of our data connections to the Scottish Wide Area Network (SWAN), a shared network across Scotland's public sector that provides better connectivity, support, performance, and value for money compared to our previous commercial providers. We also replaced out network infrastructure through the SWAN Value Added Services, bringing improvements to the security and resilience of our systems.

Board Governance: After welcoming new Board members last year, in 2019-20 we completed their induction programme to support them in fulfilling their role. We also trialled paperless working for Board members, with 50% of members receiving electronic papers only. The Executive Team is also now paperless for all Board and Committee meetings, as well as their team and management meetings.

Equality and Diversity: Our efforts to promote equality and diversity within the National Park gathered steam in 2019-20. In October, at the request of our Youth Committee, our Board took the #iwill Pledge to support inclusion of young people in decision making in the National Park. The #iwill campaign aims to make participation in social action such as volunteering, fundraising, mentoring and campaigning part of life for 10-20 year-olds, and looks to engage more partners around the role young people can play to address key environment challenges. We also delivered week-long Junior Ranger programmes at four high schools and improved the accessibility of the Callander's Landscape website. Our Volunteer Equality and Diversity Survey showed an increase in diversity of our volunteers, in particular an increase in female and young volunteers.

Volunteer engagement: We expanded the range of volunteer opportunities through the year, enabling people from a wide range of backgrounds to enjoy, value and help manage the National Park. The number of volunteer projects delivered with partners increased by 45% from 2018/19 figures. Volunteer Rangers delivered 8865 hours of visitor inspiration, our highest amount of Volunteer Ranger support ever. Our total conservation volunteering delivery was 7653 hours, an increase of around 600 hours from the previous year.

Infrastructure: Using funding provided by the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund and our own funds, we made significant upgrades to visitor facilities around Loch Lomond. In total, these projects resulted in £868k of upgrades covering:

- Refurbished public toilets with increased provision and 24-hour access provided at Inveruglas and Tarbet
- Car park resurfacing and electric vehicle charging installed at Inveruglas
- A new chemical toilet disposal point installed at Tarbet
- Improvements to public toilets at Luss making entry and exit easier
- Improvements and increased provision of public toilets at Balmaha (completion delayed due to COVID-19)
- Introduction of smart compacting bins at Inveruglas, Tarbet, Milarrochy and Balmaha

Litter Prevention: Following a successful Spring Clean and all staff Litter Action day, our litter prevention work continued across the Park. Notable partnership projects included the ongoing joint service agreement with Argyll and Bute Council along West Loch Lomond, a Litter and Waste Summit delivered with the Community Partnership which was attended by more than 50 community and national stakeholders, and our Litter Prevention Manager advising on the Scottish Government's National Litter Strategy review. This strategic work and engagement also led to the development of a draft Litter and Waste Prevention Strategy, which will be considered by our Board in 2020/21.