



# CEO Update

## Agenda Item 5

### National Park Authority Board Meeting

14<sup>th</sup> June 2021

Paper for information

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#### 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(s)

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

#### 3. Scottish Government

- 3.1. Following the Scottish Government elections, the First Minister has now appointed Cabinet and Ministerial positions.
- 3.2. The Minister responsible for National Parks is Mairi McAllan MSP as the Minister for Environment, Biodiversity and Land Reform. As well as the topics in her title Ms McAllan's other responsibilities include forestry, water quality, flooding, marine planning, peatland, climate justice and Crown Estate Scotland. Ms McAllan will be working to two Cabinet Secretaries who both have responsibilities for matters of relevance to the National Park's work.
- 3.3. Former National Parks Minister Mairi Gougeon has been appointed Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands in May 2021 with a responsibility for agriculture. Ms McAllan will also work to Michael Matheson who is now Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport in May 2021. Mr Matheson will have responsibility for key aspects of delivering government policies and targets in relation to climate, biodiversity and sustainable development including overseeing partner bodies such as NatureScot, SEPA and Zero Waste Scotland. Bringing these

aspects together with transport and infrastructure responsibilities represents an opportunity for the National Park's work where sustainable transport, roads investment issues and their relationship with climate and biodiversity targets will be a key issue.

- 3.4. Other Ministerial appointments of importance to National Park work areas include Ivan McKee as Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise and Tom Arthur MSP as the Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth in May 2021. Both will work to Kate Forbes MSP as the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy.
- 3.5. Following retirements, there are new senior roles in the Scottish Government's Environment and Forestry team with responsibilities for National Parks with Kevin Quinlan as Director (replacing Bridget Campbell) and Cate Turton as Deputy Director (replacing Keith Connal).
- 3.6. Over the coming period there will be a focus on engaging with as many of these key figures as possible to discuss the National Park Authority's plans and how it is contributing to the multiple policy areas described above.

#### **4. Visitor Management**

- 4.1. As Scotland emerges from lockdown restrictions there has been a significant focus on preparing for the return of visitors to the National Park and Members will recall reviewing the Joint Response Plan at the March Board meeting.
- 4.2. The National Park Authority continues to contribute significantly to the strategic work of the National Visitor Management Steering Group. Members will recall that this is chaired by VisitScotland CEO Malcolm Roughead and oversees three working groups looking at Communication and Education, Infrastructure and Investment and Prevention, Regulation & Reassurance with National Park officers inputting to all three. The CEO co-Chairs the Infrastructure and Investment Group. The progress made to date was shared at a second virtual National Visitor Management Summit chaired by former Cabinet Secretary Fergus Ewing MSP on 19<sup>th</sup> March.
- 4.3. The Infrastructure and Investment Group has sought to establish investment needs for visitor hotspots across Scotland and to influence increased funding. Recent outcomes have included The Scottish Government announcing funding of £6.2million available across Scotland through the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund for 2021.
- 4.4. In addition, Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park has been identified as one of five strategic visitor management areas in Scotland. In response to the need for a more place based approach to funding projects a Pilot Development Plan fund has been launched through the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund to support work to develop strategic investment plans. The National Park has been successful in securing £70k towards this work which will support our planning work for priority destinations such as the West Loch Lomond and East Loch Lomond corridor. This will include enabling sustainable transport services to help alleviate significant traffic and parking issues (which will include piloting some services later this season). The

intention is that these strategic plans will help inform future national funding rounds and more of a programme approach.

- 4.5. NatureScot has also launched a second round of its Better Places Green Recovery Fund with £2.75million available to fund additional visitor management activity in “hot spot” locations in Scotland during the 2021 season over and above any service improvements and infrastructure already budgeted for or in place. Many communities, landowners and organisations in the National Park have benefited from this which includes funding for seasonal rangers/wardens, temporary toilets and community led issue and information gathering work.
- 4.6. This national work has also led to a more co-ordinated approach to visitor communications and campaigns under the #RespectProtectEnjoy banner. National responsible visitor campaigns have been led by VisitScotland supported by partners involving videos, social media content and billboards. This has been supported by more outdoor access focussed campaigns led by NatureScot. Our own activity supported this and we achieved significant national media coverage in the period leading up to travel restrictions lifting on 15<sup>th</sup> April promoting be prepared and respect messages.
- 4.7. Within the National Park the preparations set out in the Joint Response Plan were shared at a well-attended Preseason Stakeholder Briefing Session held virtually on Friday 26<sup>th</sup> March. National Park Officers were joined by many partners from the Safe Recovery Action Group to discuss the Plan with a wide range of community, business and landowner representatives. A number of update newsletters have been sent out since then and there are plans to hold another similar session in the coming weeks to take stock of experiences of the season to date. A range of localised meetings have also been held with local communities and businesses and we continue to invest time in talking and listening to local stakeholders as part of our communications approach, ensuring they are aware of the wide range of often unseen preventative work that takes place while also responding to negative issues they are reporting. This is also balanced by the need to help support the recovery of the tourism sector in the National Park with many fragile businesses and their employees facing an uncertain future.
- 4.8. Since the lifting of travel restrictions on 15<sup>th</sup> April the visitor season has so far seen the positive impacts of the pre-season preparations and effective partnership working between the National Park Safe Recovery Action Group bodies, although visitor related pressures in key hotspot areas still very much remain. The work that has gone into the Joint Response Visitor Management Plan, led by the National Park Authority has reaped the benefits of providing a coordinated framework for assisting all the partners in their efforts around joined up communications, infrastructure management and enforcement activities required to manage the season. Partners meet weekly to review the situation on the ground and plan forthcoming activity and this has cemented strong relationships amongst staff from across the Park.
- 4.9. Many partners and as well as local groups have benefited from extra funding support to deal with the pressures of COVID relaxation and staycations, and while

this has meant some additional seasonal staff have appeared on the ground, all partners are finding recruitment challenging and several posts still remain unfilled, which reflects the UK-wide picture of staff shortages. Despite this weekly reports indicate high levels of engagement and visitor compliance from Rangers and others staff, with many potential situations being dealt with before they escalate further. Enforcement is used as a last resort however and Rangers and Police colleagues see a rise in issues during busy periods. While data is still being gathered there so far appears to be less anti-social behaviour and formal enforcement than was experienced following unlocking last year.

4.10. The colder weather at the start of the season, followed by recent warmer weather has been a significant influence on visitor numbers, with the late May public holiday weekend seeing a huge spike in numbers and the resulting issues of traffic, parking and litter. East Loch Lomond continues to be a vehicle-based hotspot and despite newly installed signage at Drymen and car park monitoring, traffic volumes and parking problems can cause multiple issues for the authorities, local residents and visitors themselves. As part of the Joint Response Visitor Management Plan work is underway to look at solutions to help alleviate this pressure, including traffic management, parking capacity and sustainable transport opportunities. The growing number of motorhomes coming to the Park are also creating additional pressures in several areas across the Park, and further investment is required to mitigate and dilute negative impacts whilst exploring potential opportunities for local businesses and communities. The pressures from the competing needs of coaches (now beginning to return) overnighting campervans and day visitors continue to be a management challenge at some locations.

4.11. Planning for infrastructure investment both within this and future years is ongoing and there will be stakeholder and community engagement work which will be undertaken in the coming months to inform this work. Media coverage and engagement continues with the National Park Authority being regularly approached to offer comment and guidance on visitor numbers and behaviour, including planning ahead, what to expect when you arrive and water safety during the warm weather. Members will be provided with more detail on the data being collected for this season in future reports

## **5. Regional Land Use Partnerships**

5.1. Members will recall that the National Park Authority was successful in being selected as one of 5 pilot Rural Land Use Partnership Areas. The Scottish Government has now offered a £30k grant award to support this work.

5.2. The requirements of the pilot are to:

- Establish a partnership structure able to deliver a collaborative approach to land use change decision-making involving national and local government, land owners and managers, communities and stakeholders.
- Develop a regionally appropriate governance for the pilot.
- Enable the development of a Regional Land Use Framework by 2023, which will outline how to use a natural capital approach to identify potential land use changes across the National Park.

5.3. Discussions are ongoing with the Scottish Government on points of clarification before proceeding with this work and a fuller update of our plans to progress this will be presented to Board Members in due course.

## 6. COP26

6.1. Work is progressing to prepare for the National Park's involvement in activities associated with the COP26 summit to be held in Glasgow over the first two weeks in November. Increasing approaches and enquiries are being received seeking to involve us in many activities planned by others.

6.2. Members will recall that we are a partner in an Expression of Interest submission to the COP26 Green Zone organisers on behalf of all 15 UK National Parks to hold an event. This is intended to focus on how protected landscapes are playing a vital part in delivering nature based approaches in the fight against climate change. Initial signals are that this is being positively received. More recently discussions have opened up with the US National Parks Service, Europarc and IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) to discuss the possibility of extending this opportunity to the international protected landscapes family. A separate Expression of Interest bid has also been led by NatureScot with the National Parks amongst the partners which again has a natural capital theme.

6.3. Participation in COP26 events requires all participating organisations to make specific commitments as part of signing up to the [Race to Zero](#) initiative. The discussion amongst UK National Parks is to explore declaring shared net zero targets. In line with our own Mission Zero Route Map we expect all National Park Authorities to declare that their own operations will be net zero by 2030. The second more ambitious commitment being discussed will be to set targets for the National Parks to be net zero as places. A carbon accounting model has been developed to help inform this work and associated route maps with the Lake District being the most advanced. We hope to do the work to model the carbon baseline for Loch Lomond and The Trossachs in the second half of this year as an important contribution to inform our future policies and target setting. Discussions are ongoing about how best to declare our aspirations for net zero places while this work is ongoing.

6.4. In respect of COP26 activities and requests by others, an internal officer group has been established to inform our approach. This will include structuring our own criteria for deciding what events and activities would be the most beneficial to support in terms of impact on identified key audiences and influencers. The group will also lead on work to plan activities for the lead-in period to the COP26 event itself when it is expected that momentum will build to focus on climate issues and showcase our work. The officer group is therefore working on identifying projects and case studies in the National Park we would like to showcase and creating associated content along with identifying staff leads and relevant partners and local stakeholders, including young people as part of our work with the Youth Committee. A clearer programme of anticipated activity will be developed and shared with Board members when this is available. Despite the main COP26 summit going ahead in

person there remains uncertainty about what other activities will be in person and therefore contingencies for virtual events and presentations will be to the fore.

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