



# Visitor Management

## Agenda Item 12

### National Park Authority Board Meeting

13th December 2021

#### Paper for information

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#### 1. Purpose

1.1. The purpose of this paper is to give Board an overview of the 2021 visitor season in the National Park including the work of the National Park Safe Recovery Action Group partners. The report also provides an update on the progress made towards longer term infrastructure and services improvements, including early project delivery.

#### 2. Recommendation(s)

2.1. Members are requested to: note the contents of this paper and associated appendix (2021 Season Review report).

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

3.1. The work detailed in this paper and the appendices contributes directly to Outcome 8 (Visitor Management) and Outcome 10 (Placemaking) of the National Park Partnership Plan 2018-23.

#### 4. Background

4.1. In the CEO Update Paper to Board in September 2021, Members were provided with an update on this year's exceptionally busy visitor season which gave an indication of apparent trends and staff feedback. It was clear that

unprecedented pressures were being experienced in some areas of the National Park.

- 4.2. The 2020 visitor season was also considered to be unprecedented in its nature and whilst many of the visitor related pressures experienced, such as traffic congestion, littering and irresponsible behaviours were not new to the Park, the combination of factors resulting from the pandemic lockdown meant that they were felt particularly acutely and placed considerable extra strain on our public agencies and some local communities.
- 4.3. In response, the National Park Authority and other partners from the National Park Safe Recovery Action Group (NPSRAG) have been working in partnership to ensure that lessons were learnt from 2020 and that the resources required to best manage the acute visitor pressures were funded and deployed in 2021. A significant feature was increased numbers of staff on the ground which have helped manage peak visitor pressures as well as could have been reasonably expected.
- 4.4. The comprehensive 2021 Season Review (appendix 1) builds upon the positive feedback which the 2020 version received. It captures the key headlines and experiences from the NPSRAG partners this year and again provides the basis for our collective work over the winter months to prepare for what is assumed will be another very busy season in 2022. It also helps to inform longer term preventative solutions which will require capital investment and are being developed through our Place Programme.
- 4.5. The Place Programme is also looking to bring together partners with important visitor assets and services to develop an agreed partnership investment programme. This demonstrates how partners are coming together locally and nationally to plan and invest in our collective infrastructure and services to reduce pressures on place and climate whilst maintaining a quality and enriching visitor and resident experience. This report provides an update on this developing area of work.

## **5. Headlines from 2021 Season Review**

- 5.1. Appendix 1 contains full details of the Season Review carried out in conjunction with partners, but Members are asked to note some key headlines below:
  - 5.1.1. The National Park continues to provide extensive opportunities to enjoy nature and the outdoors at a time when it has been most needed for many thousands of people whether visitors or locals residents. The rise in domestic travel and staycations has continued and sustained significant visitor pressures despite the reduction in international visitors.
  - 5.1.2. The expected challenges around high car volumes and some inconsiderate behaviours remain however in 2021 staff across the partnership were less restricted by COVID safe measures, more facilities and businesses were open, and crucially more staff and management measures were funded and supported to address the acute issues;

- 5.1.3. Camping continues to prove increasingly popular with many people including families, and offers the opportunity for people to connect with nature and experience an overnight stay at low cost;
- 5.1.4. The popularity of water recreation continues to increase, from open water swimming and paddleboards through to personal water crafts which have seen a significant jump in Loch Lomond registration numbers. Unfortunately an increase in Loch Lomond Byelaw violations by personal watercraft was also witnessed this year.
- 5.1.5. Local partnership working with our local authorities, Police Scotland, Transport Scotland and Forestry and Land Scotland colleagues continues to be an essential theme across new ways of working where all parties are endeavouring to deliver more whilst working under revenue pressures or short term funding programmes;
- 5.1.6. The profile of visitor management remains high at a national level and the benefits of the National Steering Group and sub-groups are being seen through enhanced and focused funding allocations; sharing knowledge and intelligence; and increased political awareness of issues and opportunities;
- 5.1.7. Such funding includes Better Places funding which allowed other organisations and communities to provide temporary facilities (toilets, bins, site staff) as well as seasonal ranger staff to great effect at hotspots including Arrochar and Strathfillan.
- 5.1.8. Virtual meetings with local communities and stakeholders have continued with good attendance and engagement levels including focussed engagement to inform emerging sub-destination proposals;
- 5.1.9. The scale of the additional visitor management costs borne by the public bodies (and communities this year) in the National Park through 2021 are being collated and we have a better understanding of the real costs of enhanced presence and enforcement across the extended visitor season;
- 5.1.10. Negative impacts were unfortunately acutely felt by some local communities and land managers however these were far less than witnessed across the 2020 season. These are largely around traffic volumes, irresponsible parking and irresponsible behaviours from some with Balloch and Luss being a particular focus for the latter;
- 5.1.11. The significant increase in enforcement action witnessed in 2020 has continued and increased in some locations reflecting the increased staff presence. However we have also witnessed behaviours changing in other locations where higher volumes of responsible visitors have changed how a site feels and functions with a corresponding reduction in irresponsible behaviours.

## 6. Preparing for the 2022 Season

- 6.1. Appendix 1 also sets out the preparations to date on actions being developed for inclusion in the 2022 Joint Response Visitor Management Plan. The accelerated infrastructure projects highlighted below will also be included within that Plan which will be presented to the National Park Authority Board in March 2022 following engagement with all key stakeholders and partners.
- 6.2. A key area of work which Members should be aware of will be around initial pilots and steps towards enhanced public transport options across the National Park. A shift away from car dominance and reliance within the National Park presents a significant challenge but also offers opportunities for enhanced visitor and community experience, job creation, inclusion and reduced carbon emissions from visits into and within the National Park.

## 7. Visitor Infrastructure and Services Planning

- 7.1. The Joint Response Visitor Management Plan Action developed with partners included the following commitment;

*“A 5 year capital infrastructure and service enhancement programme will be developed and prioritised with partners and stakeholders, led by LLTNPA.”*

- 7.2. This reflects a shared recognition that the provision of good quality infrastructure and services in the right locations is essential in alleviating the pressures brought by increasing visitor numbers and a shared commitment to developing a prioritised five year programme of visitor management infrastructure and service enhancements.
- 7.3. In the busiest parts of the National Park much the existing visitor infrastructure is not coping with the new levels of sustained multiple demands; not meeting visitor, community and business needs; not helping the National Park be a net-zero place and not making the contribution it could to green infrastructure and nature. With our new 5 year allocation of capital funding from the Scottish Government we now have an opportunity to take a new strategic view of the preparation of a partnership capital investment plan for the National Park.
- 7.4. Infrastructure and Services Plans across eight identified Visitor Management Sub-Areas in the National Park will form the basis of Project Area proposals. These plans will be guided by a broad framework of Overarching Principles. The development of this is being supported by the work of the Board’s Futures Group.
- 7.5. It is also intended to develop a Visitor Infrastructure Design Guide for the National Park. The Design Guide will be a further level of detail for partners that will complement our current Planning Guidance. This work will collectively inform the Five Year Visitor Management Plan which set out the project plan for investment in visitor infrastructure in the National Park.

- 7.6. In this first year of the Plan, with funding secured from the Scottish Government COVID Recovery Task Force via the VisitScotland Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund, we are currently undertaking the first two of these Visitor Management Sub-Area strategies for East Loch Lomond and for West Loch Lomond. Work on these strategies is taking place with dedicated Visitor Management Groups and other partners between September 2021 and January 2022. These groups ensure that local communities, landowners and businesses are part of the process of project development. Once finalised, these strategies will form the basis of further strategic bids to the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (including partnership projects) to secure funding on a place basis for a series of capital projects. Plans for a further three areas will follow behind this work, with an aim to advance these during 2022/23.
- 7.7. Members will recall that a priority in response to receiving a favourable Scottish Government Grant in Aid uplift was to rebuild lost organisation capacity and resilience. A particular priority has been to restore lost capital project capacity and skills with the recruitment of a new Place Projects team. With this team almost now in place it is pursuing both accelerated capital projects this year while developing the new multi-year programme, including stakeholder engagement. It is intended that the approach to delivering a Five Year Capital Infrastructure Plan will be published by Summer 2022 covering the period from 2021/22 to 2025/26. A further report will be presented to the Board setting out the proposals.

## **8. Accelerated Projects**

- 8.1. Trossachs Connectivity - Loch Achray - The area around the popular Ben A'an and Ben Venue hill path accesses have featured significant amounts of irresponsible and dangerous verge parking due to the ever increasing popularity of this destination. RTIF funding has already been secured to extend the existing Forest and Land Scotland Ben A'an car park and to undertake various improvements around the Loch Katrine Pier visitor site operated by the Loch Katrine Steamship Company. While contributing to improve the situation these measures alone are not expected to alleviate the significant traffic and car parking pressures now regularly seen in the area. Work is currently underway to introduce pilot shuttle bus services running between Callander and Aberfoyle to provide a positive alternative for people wish to access this area. Infrastructure improvements therefore need to facilitate the successful operation of such services.
- 8.2. The Feasibility Study for a shuttle bus area and seasonal overflow parking to support modal shift at Loch Achray has now been completed. This is a Forest and Land Scotland owned site lying South of the existing Ben A'an and Ben Venue car parks see Appendix 2 for a map of the location. If progressed the project would need to include well designed footpath links to allow safe pedestrian access from the interchange to the main hill path routes. The next steps for the project are as follows;

- 8.2.1. The preparation of an accompanying business case for the operation of the site and the shuttle bus services that is proposed to use the facility.
- 8.2.2. Prioritise the new shuttle bus area, seasonal overflow parking and connecting path to the Ben Venue car park. Detailed technical specifications and planning application package is a key initial task. An offroad pedestrian link to Ben A'an will form a subsequent second phase to the project, which will require further technical investigation. This further work will also consider what other facilities are required at the interchange including toilet provision.
- 8.2.3. The Board will be updated on the progress with the project and appropriate project governance will be established including dedicated project risk registers.
- 8.2.4. Other accelerated projects currently being pursued for completion in 2022 include;
  - 8.2.4.1. Site improvements at our Tarbet site to improve campervan use and better managing competing demands on the sites
  - 8.2.4.2. Improvements to Luss Pier including essential repairs and physical measures to reduce anti-social behaviour and dangerous jumping into the Loch
  - 8.2.4.3. Essential redesign and improvement works to Conic Hill path which is now badly eroded due to its ever growing popularity.

## **9. Conclusion**

- 9.1. Members are asked to note the contents of the 2021 Season Review and ongoing Infrastructure and Services work programme.
- 9.2. Despite unprecedented volumes of visitors and associated pressures, the widespread investment in staff and frontline resources following extensive preparation last winter has resulted in a largely successful season. Those issues which have escalated have been in focussed locations and not widespread.
- 9.3. Partnership working continues to reap widespread benefits for all concerned and helps create efficiencies and focus activities across public authorities. It is essential that this continues.
- 9.4. Some of the additional resources have been made possible by additional discretionary COVID funding made available in 2021. This funding administered through NatureScot's Better Places funding allowed other organisations and communities to provide temporary facilities (toilets, bins, site staff) as well as seasonal ranger staff. The success of some of these measures will also help inform where longer term investment in permanent facilities is needed.
- 9.5. The National Visitor Management Steering Group has met a number of times with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Economy to share the successes of

the 2021 season across Scotland's rural hotspots and to highlight the need for ongoing resources. It is welcome that there is a further £6.2M commitment to the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund for 2022. However, confirmation of non-capital resourcing is awaited and may form part of the Scottish Government 2022/23 budget announcement expected on 9<sup>th</sup> December. Members will be aware that the National Park Authority has also requested an uplift in Grant in Aid to replace previous one-off COVID funding and reflecting other rising costs.

**Appendix 1: Season Review 2021**

**Appendix 2: Loch Achray Map**

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