



# CEO Update

## Agenda Item 10

### National Park Authority Board Meeting

26 September 2022

Paper for information

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1. Purpose.....	1
2. Recommendation(s).....	1
3. Scottish Government.....	1
4. Proposed Beaver Translocation at RSPB Loch Lomond National Nature Reserve .....	5
5. Best Companies Staff Survey Results .....	5

#### 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 asked to note the contents of the report.

#### 3. Scottish Government

- 3.1. Visit by Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity: Lorna Slater MSP, Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity made another official visit to the National Park on 4<sup>th</sup> August as part of her summer tour of visits across Scotland. The visit provided an opportunity to focus on issues not covered on previous visits including active travel, 20 minute neighbourhoods, sustainable transport, low carbon business initiatives and investment in our path network. The visit included seeing the Drymen Green Cycling Hub, a project led by the [Drymen Community Development Trust \(DCDT\)](#) offering free e-Bike charging, e-Bike loaning and bicycle maintenance facilities supported by National Park Green Recovery funding of £27,000. She also heard about National Park funded work with the Drymen community and its neighbouring villages in collaboration with

[Forth Environment Link](#) to explore the 20 minute neighbourhood concept in a more rural context. The project explored how residents currently access facilities or services, and what is needed to enable people in a rural village to live more locally set out in a [Living Well Locally Vision and Route Map](#). Also included in the visit was a presentation from the owners of the Oak Tree in Balmaha sharing various initiatives across the company in order to become more sustainable including investment in woodchip bio-mass plant, which now uses the by-product of the coffee roasters across their coffee shops and restaurants which are recycled and remade into solid biofuel. Solar panels are further reducing their carbon usage and shift to LED lighting saving their lighting energy usage by 80-90%. The day concluded by visiting the heavily used Conic Hill path and discussing the significant investment needed to repair the route now in poor condition as a result of the steep increase in its popularity in recent years.

- 3.2. Process to Designate a New National Park: Following the announcement earlier this year to commence the process to designate at least one new National Park by the end of the current Parliamentary term, the process to develop criteria is now underway. Naturescot has now been asked to provide advice to our Minister on the criteria that should be used to select the preferred locations from nominated candidate areas. Currently Naturescot is convening a stakeholder group comprised of relevant public bodies, NGOs and representative organisations to discuss what the approach should be. Both National Parks sit on this group. There continue to be discussions about whether the current role, functions and powers of existing National Parks could be strengthened to help achieve more on the climate and nature crises. At this point it is not clear how reviewing current roles and powers would fit in with the overall process to designate new National Parks. The next stage will be for NatureScot to consult on selection criteria and potential changes in the Autumn prior to providing advice to the Minister. Opportunities for the existing National Parks to comment will be clarified as the process becomes clearer.
- 3.3. Scottish Biodiversity Strategy: The Scottish Government are currently consulting on their proposed [Biodiversity Strategy](#), which is due for publication in finalised form later this year. Following on from the current Scottish Biodiversity Strategy this paper is a precursor to a planned new Natural Environment Bill, expected in 2023. It is expected that this will result in the creation of rolling delivery plans alongside new statutory nature restoration targets. The consultation paper outlines the evidence for the continued decline in our biodiversity and proposes a draft Vision for 2045:
- 3.4. *'By 2045 we will have substantially restored and regenerated biodiversity across our land, freshwater and seas. Our natural environment of plants, animals, insects, aquatic life and other species will be richly diverse, thriving,*

*resilient and adapting to climate change. Everyone will understand the benefits from and importance of biodiversity and will play their role in the stewardship of nature in Scotland for future generations.'*

- 3.5. The paper also defines two key milestones to focus upon; (i) reversing biodiversity loss by 2030 and (ii) restoring and regenerating biodiversity by 2045. A series of outcomes have been created around broad landscape types and marine environments. In rural environments these focus on farmland, woodlands / forestry, soils and uplands (including peatlands). In fresh water environments these focus on rivers, lochs and wetlands. Coastal, marine and urban environments are also a focus, with cross-cutting themes of improving overall ecosystem health, resilience and connectivity.
- 3.6. Our own Future Nature Vision is very well aligned with the proposed Biodiversity Strategy and we are supportive of this ambitious and outcome orientated approach to rebuilding our declining nature. The National Park has played an advisory role in the development of the strategy and this will continue after the consultation as it is finalised. The challenge of delivery will be huge, but alongside tackling the climate crisis we expect this will be a major focus of our work for many years to come.
- 3.7. Consultation on Proposed New Land Reform Bill: The next Land Reform Bill is proposed to make important changes to the framework of law and policy that govern the system of ownership, management and use of land in Scotland. The consultation sets out the Scottish Government's proposals for the Bill and seeks views on a range of land-related issues. The Bill seeks to address long-standing concerns about the highly concentrated pattern of land ownership in rural areas of Scotland and seeks to ensure that our land is owned, managed, and used in ways that rise to the challenges of net zero, nature restoration, and a just transition. Part of this is the aspiration is to have a framework of law and policy that ensures communities can make the most of these opportunities.
- 3.8. As part of the Scottish Government commitment to bringing about "net zero" carbon emissions via a just transition there is a significant need to make changes in the use of land as part of taking action on nature restoration and biodiversity. A key concern is to ensure those in receipt of public money meet public expectations in relation to these goals.
- 3.9. The Bill is split into various Parts with the first parts aimed at 'tackling the issues associated with scale and concentration of land ownership in Scotland'. The proposals seek to 'balance the interests of the general public and local communities with the interests and rights of individual property owners'. New measures are proposed for 'large scale' landholdings (defined as land over a threshold of 3,000 hectares, or land that accounts for more

than a fixed percentage of a data zone (or adjacent data zone) or local authority ward(s) within a rural area, or land that accounts for more than a specified minimum proportion of a permanently inhabited island) (family farms are exempt). These include:

- **Strengthening the Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement** which is currently voluntary and offers protocols and advice on how landowners, land managers and communities can work together and make better and fairer decisions on land use. The Bill proposes that large scale landholdings have a legal duty to comply with the Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement as this will ensure a fair transition to net zero as well as support Community Wealth Building and economic benefits.
  - **Compulsory Land Management Plans** are currently not required and there is no legal requirement for landowners to share publicly their information on medium and long term land management planning. The Bill proposes that these will now be required in order to demonstrate sustainable management of land that will help deliver net zero and nature goals, share plans for engagement with local communities and set out how these land management plans will connect with other local priorities, opportunities and public policy, including community plans, regional land use strategies and national policy.
  - The Bill proposes that the requirement to publish such Plans should be enforced by way of a range of cross compliance mechanisms, such as being a pre-requisite to receive public funding for land based activity. So under this approach landowners would have to demonstrate that they have an up to date Management Plan to be eligible for public funding. These would be prepared and updated every 5 years.
  - **Regulation of the market for large sale land transfers via the introduction of a new public interest test and prior notification of intention to sell.** This new requirement is largely driven by the rise in off market transactions and rapidly rising land values. This is in recognition that these factors can exclude communities from access to ownership of large-scale landholdings. The Scottish Government also recognises that in some situations there are benefits associated with large scale land ownership, the public benefits this can provide. It also recognises the need for private investment in natural capital to help meet our climate change targets.
- 3.10. The proposals, if enacted in the Scottish Parliament, would be significant in the National Park where we are already engaged with many significant landowners. How the National Park would be involved in the operation of measures such as compulsory land management plans will require further discussion and these developments will be required to be considered as part of the development of our forthcoming new National Park Management Plan.

#### **4. Proposed Beaver Translocation at RSPB Loch Lomond National Nature Reserve**

- 4.1. One conservation success story that is attracting gaining prominence in the National Park at present is the return of the [Eurasian beaver](#). This native species was hunted to extinction across the UK several centuries ago but following reintroductions has now returned to several parts of Scotland and is naturally colonising the Park mostly from the growing population on the Tay catchment to the north. The species which is now protected by law creates biodiversity-rich wetland landscapes through their damming and tree felling behaviours, but this can also result in conflict with human activities, requiring active management and mitigation in some situations.
- 4.2. With these factors in mind the Scottish Government is looking to reinforce this range expansion by translocating some beavers from conflict areas into suitable, beaver-free habitats. Our Minister has written to the National Park to encourage facilitation of translocation sites in our area. Connected to this initiative the RSPB are currently engaging with local stakeholders on a proposal to translocate a number of beavers into their [Loch Lomond Reserve](#). We have supported through direct funding and staff time, the independent engagement process that is currently underway in connection with the proposal and we understand that the RSPB hope to submit an application to NatureScot for permission to translocate including a report of their consultation process for a possible release of animals later this year.
- 4.3. The return of the beaver has been highlighted within our Future Nature work as an important nature restoration driver in our freshwater lochs, but this comes alongside the need to mitigate some of their impacts through the existing NatureScot-run [Beaver Mitigation Scheme](#).

#### **5. Best Companies Staff Survey Results**

- 5.1. Over the last 10 years the National Park has participated in the b-Heard survey run by [Best Companies](#). This is a widely recognised survey which helps organisations like ours to measure, recognise and improve levels of workplace engagement. The past surveys have really helped to focus on what is working well in the organisation and where we can make improvements in the way we work. The results of our latest survey carried out this summer have just been received. This is our first survey since 2019 and the impacts of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. It gives staff an opportunity to have their say about our organisation and helps us understand what we are doing well, and what we might be able to do better. This is the 5<sup>th</sup> survey we've participated in, and it is a valuable source of feedback. The results are in the process of being analysed and details shared with

individual teams. The **75.25% response rate** is a similar level to the last survey response in 2019.

- 5.2. The overall outcome is that **we have once again achieved 1 Star status again this year** but with a higher overall score than 2019. Best Companies define a 1 star companies as having 'very good' levels of workplace engagement. A 1 Star accreditation from Best Companies is a significant achievement especially following some of the exceptional challenges the organisation has faced over the last couple of years of the pandemic.
- 5.3. Following the sharing of the detailed results with all staff, the next stage will be for teams to agree actions for improvement, which respond to areas where scoring could be improved.

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