



Draft National Park Partnership Plan 2024-2029

Agenda Item 5

National Park Authority Board Meeting

13 March 2023

Paper for decision

1. Purpose.....	1
2. Recommendation(s).....	1
3. Contribution to National Park Partnership Plan and/or Our 5-year Plan.....	2
4. Background.....	2
5. Risks	6
6. Next steps	7
7. Appendices.....	8

1. Purpose

1.1. To present a text version of the proposed draft National Park Partnership Plan 24-29 for the Board to approve for the purposes of consulting partners, local and national stakeholders and the wider public over a 12-week period commencing in April.

1.2. The report also sets out the background that has informed the preparation of the Draft Plan and the links to currently stated Scottish Government priorities and expectations of Scotland's National Parks.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1. That the Board

Approves the **Draft** National Park Partnership Plan attached as Appendix 1 for the purposes of a formal 12-week consultation commencing in April 2023.

Agrees to delegate final editorial adjustments and document and engagement design to officers

Notes that final arrangements for carrying out wide ranging consultation and engagement with stakeholders and the wider public are being finalised and will be subject to further Board briefing prior to the launch of the consultation.

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

3.1. This report proposes a new Draft National Park Partnership Plan 2024-2029 for consultation which in due course will replace our current 2018-23 National Park Partnership Plan.

4. Background

4.1. The National Park Partnership Plan is the management plan for the National Park as a place. A National Park Plan is required under the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 to set out a National Park Authority's policy for (a) managing a National Park; and (b) coordinating the exercise of an Authority's functions in relation to a National Park and the functions of other public bodies and office holders to the extent that they affect a National Park, with a view to ensuring that the National Park aims are collectively achieved in a co-ordinated way. The Act also requires a National Park Authority to prepare a plan every 5 years and to submit this to Scottish Ministers for approval following consultation. The current National Park Partnership Plan 2018-23 is now in its final year of implementation and work has been underway to develop a new Plan during 2022.

4.2. The relationship between the National Park Partnership Plan and the National Park Authority's other strategic and operational plans is illustrated in the diagram attached as Appendix 2. As our key Minister approved strategic plan it sets out the direction, aims and outcomes for our other plans to deliver. At this stage the proposed draft Plan does not outweigh our current and approved adopted plans but will gain material weight in decisions at a more advanced stage once consultation has taken place. This includes playing the role of being our Regional Spatial Strategy for planning in due course. Our new Local Development Plan process will soon get underway and will set out in more detail how our planning policies will reflect the policies and priorities set out in the draft National Park Partnership Plan

4.3. There could not be a more opportune moment to be preparing a new National Park Partnership Plan. So much has changed since the current Plan was prepared. The recognition by national Governments around the world that we must urgently tackle a twin nature and climate crises, while transitioning to a greener economy is now driving many policy priorities in Scotland and the UK. These challenges (and arguably opportunities) are compounded by both the ongoing recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently the cost-of-living crisis arising from the war in Ukraine. All these major events have had profound

effects both on communities and businesses within the National Park (and beyond) and on the way we look at the public benefits that National Parks can deliver for society in addressing all of these challenges in the coming years.

- 4.4. The Draft National Park Partnership Plan 2024-29 attached and proposed for consultation seeks to rise to these challenges. It both emphasises the sense of urgency to scale up our collective efforts to tackle these challenges and sets out the strong leadership role the National Park Authority can play through this Plan to inspire everyone to work with us on the significant change that must be delivered.
- 4.5. In particular, the Draft Plan considers what opportunities there are in the National Park as a place and as a significant landscape to support the Scottish Government's targets to be a Net Zero Nation and to have restored nature by 2045, while enabling a fair transition to a greener economy. For this reason, the vision for the Plan is focussed on what we need to achieve by 2045. While 2045 can feel some time away, the proposed actions and priorities for the 5-year period of the Plan are focussed on what needs to happen if the National Park can achieve the interim targets of 70% reductions in carbon emissions and halting the decline in nature both by 2030. Given the opportunities that being a National Park presents, the Draft Plan discusses whether we should be even more ambitious than the national targets currently set. Our [Future Nature strategy](#) sets out an ambition to see widespread restoration of nature in the National Park by 2040 and the Draft National Park Plan discusses whether we should also be striving to be a Net Zero National Park by the same date, and to be a 'net absorber' of carbon by 2045.
- 4.6. This Draft Plan builds on a number of areas of work that have already been presented to the Board and places them in a wider strategic context. These include Mission Zero, Future Nature, the Place Programme, Sustainable Transport Futures Group work and the draft Regional Spatial Strategy (submitted previously to Scottish Government). In December 2020 the National Park Authority Board signed [the Edinburgh Declaration](#), an international agreement that is a statement of intent from the Convention on Biodiversity, agreeing that subnational, regional and local governments across the world commit to taking bolder action to halt global biodiversity loss.
- 4.7. The draft Plan also draws on the findings of a new Carbon Model that has been developed for the National Park, which sets out what levels of Greenhouse Gas emissions (and rates of sequestration) are associated with a range of activities related to the National Park as a place. It has provided invaluable data and insight into where we best target our efforts

both to reduce emissions and to sequester carbon in the landscape, and will be published alongside this Draft Plan.

4.8. The Scottish Government expectations for what Scotland's National Parks should be delivering have also been expressed clearly in recent months. The Scottish Government commitment to designate at least one new National Park during this parliamentary term of the Scottish Parliament has also led to Scottish Ministers looking to review the role of National Parks generally, particularly in addressing the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change. In launching this process our Minister, Lorna Slater said:

'Scottish Ministers wish to see Scotland's National Parks as places that will actively demonstrate nature recovery and the transformational change needed in our approach to land-use, providing leadership and showcasing a just transition to net zero in Scotland.'

4.9. Members will be aware that NatureScot was asked to provide advice to Scottish Ministers on the role of National Parks, as well as how nominations for new National Parks could be evaluated. Proposals for what might be included in this advice were consulted on in late 2022 and Members will recall the [report received at the recent Board meeting in December 2022](#) recommending the National Park Authority response.

4.10. Publication of NatureScot's final advice to Scottish Ministers is expected imminently. In its consultation NatureScot proposed and overall purpose for National Parks **"to lead nature recovery and a just transition to net zero"**. This also included proposals to update National Park aims and potentially other parts of the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 to support this purpose.

4.11. Should Scottish Ministers be minded to consult on proposed changes to the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 then it is possible that this could coincide with the consultation on this Draft National Park Partnership Plan. We will be closely monitoring developments and discussing arrangements with Scottish Government officials should this situation arise. A verbal update will be provided to members should the advice be published following publication of this paper and before the Board meeting.

4.12. Regardless of any statutory changes that may be consulted on, this Plan nevertheless seeks to rise to the leadership role which has already been stated by Scottish Ministers. The draft Plan seeks to show how national policies can be delivered in the context and scale of a National Park. It also points to challenges that forthcoming Scottish Government policy needs to address such as through the planned Environment Bill as

well as policy on future land management payments and land reform proposals which will be considered by the Scottish Parliament in due course.

4.13. The Plan sets out this national context and a vision and outcomes for 2045 under three headings:

- **Restoring Nature**
- **Creating a Sustainable Low-Carbon Destination**
- **Enabling a Greener Economy and Sustainable Living**

For the sections in each Chapter, the plan sets out:

- **Aim** for 2045
- **Objective** for 2030
- **Actions** for the Plan Period (2024–2029)

At the end of each of the three sections, the Draft Plan sets out:

- **Who Needs to Be Involved** – Which organisations have a role in delivering the Actions
- **Policies** – Setting out our position in relation to key issues
- **How Might We Measure Success** – Suggests what measures we could adopt and where possible ambitious targets are proposed.

4.14. There are a number of technical assessments required in preparing the draft National Park Partnership Plan, namely Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA). This is to identify any potential significant positive and negative environmental impacts from implementing the Plan as drafted. These assessments have been undertaken alongside the drafting of the Draft National Park Partnership Plan so have helped inform thinking on its content and will be included in a draft environmental report that will be published alongside the Draft National Park Partnership Plan.

4.15. The high-level nature of the Plan means that many draft objectives, policies and actions have been screened out from assessment. This is mainly due to the strategic level of the draft Plan does not specify locational detail. Further assessments will be made of more detailed plans, such as Local Development Plan and at project level, to ensure a more appropriate and informed assessment can be undertaken once the locations for the actions are identified. Those parts of the plan that have gone through to detailed assessment have concluded that with the plans emphasis on enhancing nature and climate, there will be overall positive

environmental effects. Some uncertain effects on the environment have been identified for the actions linked to improvements at strategic visitor sites, however taking a strategic approach to these sites through the consideration of environmental issues within the Strategic Tourism Development Studies should ensure that any environmental effects are minimised and mitigated. The assessment of the preferred targets concludes that there will be overall positive effects for both woodland planting and peatland restoration.

4.16. A draft Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) has been undertaken assessing the impact of the plan on European designated sites. With the high strategic nature of the National Park Partnership Plan and priorities around the climate emergency and restoring nature it has been straightforward to screen out many of the policies and actions as having no significant effects on any of the European Sites, with many priorities and actions actively seeking to protect the environment and aiming to improve the condition of the European sites. The Draft National Park Partnership Plan does contain several policies and actions which promote or support areas of change that have the potential to result in likely significant effects. However, NatureScot guidance states that where effects on a given European site cannot be identified because a policy is too general, for example where it lacks any spatial definition, likely significant effects can be screened out. It has been noted that where locations are mentioned these have already been subject to a detailed HRA assessment as part of the existing Local Development Plan or through other plans and strategies in the National Park. Therefore, at this stage all of the elements of draft National Park Partnership Plan have been screened out of further assessment with more detailed plans such as the forthcoming Local Development Plan considered a more appropriate level of plan to undertake this more detailed HRA.

4.17. In terms of next steps, the draft SEA and HRA will be formally written into a draft report and this will be available to accompany Draft Plan consultation and we will also specifically seek the views of the consultation authorities (NatureScot, Historic Environment Scotland and SEPA) on the draft SEA and NatureScot to see if they are in agreement with the conclusions of the draft HRA record.

5. Risks

5.1. The main risk to be managed as we consult on the Draft Plan and finalise the Plan is the amount of significant change ongoing in the Scottish Government policy context in which the Plan will operate. As highlighted, potential changes to National Parks legislation will have to

be taken on board as part of the process as will change in other key policy areas such as agriculture and forestry support schemes, land reform and the content of a forthcoming Environment Bill, which is expected to place biodiversity commitments in statute.

5.2. A further risk is that the Draft Plan proposes significant change and that key stakeholders and the wider public respond negatively to the proposals. The approach to the consultation and making a compelling case for why change is needed will be key to enabling constructive conversations about why the time to act is now, the place to act is here and the people who can make the difference are all of us. The Draft Plan makes clear these challenges are facing all of us and that with focused, collective effort together we can tackle these truly 'wicked issues' facing Scotland, and the planet. In that sense there is greater risk in not tackling the issues we face at greater pace.

6. Next steps

6.1. The consultation and engagement programme to support the Draft Plan is being prepared. To help us design a meaningful engagement plan, insights are being gathered on the needs and preferences of stakeholders we regularly work with and people whose voices are less often heard during such consultations. It is our intention that the Draft Plan and the consultation around it opens up frank and constructive discussion on the very real issues, and opportunities, facing the National Park and the people who live, work and visit here both now and in the future.

6.2. If members are minded to approve the Draft Plan for consultation then it is envisaged that the formal 12-week consultation would be launched in mid-April. A Board briefing will be arranged to share the planned programme of engagement. Creative concepts to bring the Draft Plan to life in both digital and printed formats have been commissioned, well-known and trusted digital tool, [Commonplace](#) will be used to gather consultation responses (as was the case for the Cairngorms Draft Plan). Accompanying engagement events and materials will be designed to bring the issues and opportunities identified in the Draft Plan to life and to hear from partners how they will play their role.

6.3. Members are asked to delegate to officers to make minor editorial amendments to the Draft Plan as part of this finalisation. This will include the insertion of references highlighting the range of Scottish Government policy (including the National Performance Framework which is currently being reviewed with a public consultation due mid-March) that the draft

Plan is delivering against and references to the relevant UN Sustainable Development Goals.

7. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Draft National Park Partnership Plan 2024-29

Appendix 2 – Hierarchy of Plans

Authors: Gordon Watson and Anna MacLean

Board Sponsors: Heather Reid, Sarah Drummond and Chris Spray