



# CEO Report

## Agenda Item 8

### National Park Authority Board Meeting 11 March 2024

#### Paper for information

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#### 1. Purpose

1.1. To provide updates on significant developments affecting the strategic context in which the National Park Authority operates as well as progress on the strategic areas of work not already reported elsewhere on the Board agenda.

#### 2. Recommendation(s)

2.1. Board Members are asked to **note** the contents of this report for information.

#### 3. National Park Partnership Plan 2024-2029

3.1. Following the approval by the Board of the finalised National Park Partnership Plan 2024-2029 at its meeting on 11th December 2023, the Plan was submitted on 14<sup>th</sup> December to Scottish Ministers for approval under the terms of the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000. A letter was received from Lorna Slater MSP, Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity on 20<sup>th</sup> February confirming her approval of the Plan. She also conveyed thanks to all who played their part in the

development and design of the Plan. She reiterated that the climate emergency has to be everyone's number one priority and also welcomed the plan's ambition to ensure the National Park supports a greener, more diverse rural economy with resilient rural communities; and that it is a place for all to enjoy, with high quality visitor infrastructure and an inclusive low-carbon travel network.

3.2. Work has been underway to prepare to launch the Plan including producing a fully designed version of the Plan and a dedicated microsite that breaks the content up and makes it engaging for non-expert audiences. There will also be supporting material that will bring the Plan to life to allow staff, Board and partners to talk confidently about the vision of the Plan, the outcomes it seeks to achieve and the action needed in the next 5 years to get us closer to that vision of the National Park being 'a thriving place that is nature positive and carbon negative'. This work will help engage partner organisations to get behind its delivery and inspire others to do their bit to help deliver that vision. Further information on plans for a formal launch will be shared once they are more firmed up.

3.3. Work is also progressing to set up the frameworks for Plan delivery and monitoring of progress. At the same time a Corporate Plan is being prepared that will set out how the Park Authority needs to respond to be able to deliver its own part in the National Park Partnership Plan. This will be presented to the Board at its June meeting. In the meantime, the Annual Operating Plan and Budget for 2024/25 presented elsewhere on this agenda is the first opportunity to present our priorities for the year set against the three pillars of the National Park Partnership Plan. We will continue to review how organisation staff and financial resources are planned and reported in the context of the National Park Partnership Plan and forthcoming Corporate Plan.

#### **4. Scottish Government**

4.1. The Minister for Housing, Paul McLennan MSP, visited Balmaha on 31st January 2023, to hear about affordable housing delivery challenges in the National Park. Hosted by the National Park Authority, the meeting was attended by Board members and officers who were joined by Stirling Council, Rural Stirling Housing Association and local community representatives. The meeting provided an opportunity to discuss examples of the barriers to delivery with a focus on the consented development at Balmaha which is currently stalled due to rising construction costs. The wider community benefits that housing can unlock were outlined and there were useful pointers about how this could be framed in future housing funding bids. These discussions will be

valuable in considering new approaches to housing delivery as part of our forthcoming Local Development Plan work.

## **5. Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill**

- 5.1. The first reading of the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill was completed by the Scottish Parliament at the end of January and the principle of the Bill has been approved to progress to the next stage. The Bill is being scrutinized by the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee of the Parliament. Members will recall that the committee invited the National Park Authority to submit evidence to discuss what the practical considerations for National Parks might be as National Park Authorities would not have the power to raise a visitor levy. A report prepared by the Committee after hearing evidence from a wide range of stakeholders acknowledged that the issues raised about the potential distribution of visitor levy income within National Parks requires further consideration.
- 5.2. The second reading of the Bill in Scottish Parliament is due to be held at the end of March and this is the key stage for any proposed amendments to the Bill to be voted in. Amendments may be promoted by Scottish Ministers as well as any other MSPs. Continued discussions are being held with Scottish Government officials as well as VisitScotland colleagues who lead an advisory group preparing guidance for operating the new system. There is acceptance that the key role that National Parks play in delivering visitor management investment and strategic planning needs to be better acknowledged in the Bill. How this might be expressed in the Bill or any supporting guidance is still being explored. In the meantime there is dialogue at officer level with the four local authorities that overlap the National Park to understand how and if they intend to progress a visitor levy proposal. The Bill as currently set out allows for cross boundary collaboration in the operation of the levy.
- 5.3. It is expected that if the Bill is passed in the Scottish Parliament that it could receive Royal Assent by October and that there will be an associated timetable for the provisions coming into place. Any local authority wishing to progress a visitor levy proposal will require to prepare and consult on a plan setting out how visitor levies will be used. In the light of this any new visitor levy processes are not likely to come into force until at least 2026.
- 5.4. Debate continues on what the approach to setting levies should be as well as what types of overnight accommodation it should apply to. The practicalities of applying a levy to informal camping, camper vans parked overnight and berthing boats have already been highlighted as a concern.

## **6. New National Park**

- 6.1. The National Park Authority consultation response to Scotland's Strategic Framework for Biodiversity was submitted to the Scottish Government following the Board decision on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2023. The consideration of the wider consultation response on the proposals for National Parks as well as the wider proposals for implementing the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy are still ongoing.
- 6.2. The next stage will be the preparation of a Natural Environment Bill which will include those proposals that need to be placed on a statutory footing such as nature recovery targets. This Bill will include any proposed amendments to the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 that Scottish Ministers decide to take forward following consideration of the consultation response.
- 6.3. At the same time the process to designate at least one more National Park in Scotland continues with the deadline for submitting formal bids set for 29<sup>th</sup> February. In Spring 2024 all nominations will be appraised against the criteria set out in the appraisal framework. This will inform the decision of which area or areas should go forward for designation as a new National Park. In Summer 2024 NatureScot will carry out a detailed investigation into the area or areas selected to become a new National Park. Based on the outcome of that investigation, legislation is expected to be brought forward in order to designate at least one new National Park by 2026.

## **7. Race to Zero**

- 7.1. Members will be familiar with the carbon model which we have used to gain an understanding of the carbon footprint of the National Park as a place. Using this model we have projected the potential glide path which has led to our National Park Partnership Plan (2024-29) ambition to be a net zero place by 2035 and a net absorber of carbon beyond that. This methodology has been adopted in all 15 UK National Parks with all making a Paris Agreement aligned declaration to achieve net zero by a particular date.
- 7.2. Given the significance of this joint commitment by a coalition of National Parks, representing about 10% of the Great Britain land mass, UK National Park Chairs and CEOs met on 21 and 22 September 2023 to discuss how best to develop stronger collaboration and show collective leadership in tackling the climate and nature emergencies. At this meeting it was agreed that making a joint application to join the Race to Zero coalition would be an appropriate next step.

7.3. Race to Zero is the United Nations' global initiative rallying non-state actors (like cities, local authorities, businesses, universities) to take rigorous and immediate action to halve global emissions by 2030 and deliver a healthier, fairer zero carbon world. It was initiated ahead of the Paris Agreement to help:

- Shift the debate from long-term 2050, to near-term 2030 action
- Focus on 1.5 not 2 degrees
- Structure a role for non-state actors that are crucial to deliver decarbonisation in practice
- Introduce greater rigour and transparency

Together with global south countries, civil society, and the expert analysis of scientists, this initiative had a huge and vital impact on the Paris Agreement and has a continuing legacy. Race to Zero is now driving unprecedented action globally.

7.4. In recent years there has been increased international collaboration to highlight that National Parks globally have a crucial role to play in the twin nature and climate crises– both through leading nature-based carbon sequestration at a landscape scale, and by being part of the vanguard of decarbonisation in a rural setting. This was a big focus of our activity during COP26 when it was held in Glasgow in 2021. UK national parks will be the first national parks in the world to join the UN Race to Zero. The UN Climate Champions that lead the Race to Zero are keen to support us because they understand the critical role of National Parks to the global effort and want others to follow our lead.

7.5. Membership is free of charge. Each Race to Zero member commits to five 'starting line' actions:

1. Pledge: to take action toward or beyond a fair share of the 50% global GHG reduction needed by 2030, and to reach net zero by 2050 at the latest.
2. Plan: within 12 months develop an evidence-based emissions reduction plan in line with the pledge.
3. Proceed: take immediate action towards meeting the pledge.
4. Publish: commit to report data and actions in relation to meeting the pledge, publicly and at least annually - feeding into the UNFCCC Global Climate Action Portal.

5. Persuade: align lobbying and advocacy activities with net zero by proactively supporting climate policies consistent with the Race to Zero criteria.

All of the above aligns with undertakings we are already making through our now approved National Park Partnership Plan 2024-29. A joint application has now been submitted to join Race to Zero and an outcome is expected allow an announcement in May.

## **8. Pre-Season Visitor Management Update**

- 8.1. With the Spring bank holiday being early at the end of March this year, there is an added time pressure for our staff and partners to finalise preparations for the visitor season in the National Park. We continue to use data insights to establish visitor trends post-pandemic with the overall direction being a return to the steadily increasing visitor numbers we saw in the period up to 2019. As always, this planning requires effective communications, partners working closely together and skilled staff to provide a welcome to our visitors and help address visitor pressure-related issues before they escalate.
- 8.2. The Scottish Government draft budget proposed Grant in Aid settlement for the National Park Authority means that we are in a position to deliver a broadly similar level of service for the 2024 visitor season. However, in the light of significant financial challenges facing the Scottish Government, other national funding for visitor management has been reduced. This includes no additional visitor management funding for Forestry and Land Scotland and NatureScot and the removal of the Better Places Fund. This will not only result in a reduction of the numbers of Rangers and Wardens across some of the busiest rural areas of Scotland but also mean some organisations in the National Park will not be able to repeat some beneficial management measures seen over the past few years.
- 8.3. This situation makes the necessity for partners working closely together to share intelligence to direct resources and efforts more important than ever. This partnership is focused through the National Park Visitor Management Group which was created during the pandemic, is led by the National Park Authority and comprises the four Local Authorities, Police Scotland, Forestry and Land Scotland and Transport Scotland. This group will meet regularly from March until September to coordinate communications and deployment of resources. Nationally, this coordination is done by a national Visitor Management steering group led by VisitScotland to deliver the Visitor Management Strategy for Scotland. We will monitor the effects and impacts of this overall

reduction in resource and feed this back to Scottish Government Ministers at the end of the season. In addition to the more reactive visitor management measures, it is important that we continue to work with partners on some of the longer-term investments that will help reduce visitor pressures, increase the quality of the visitor experience, restore nature, and reduce carbon emissions. This will predominantly be carried out through our Place Programme and work to improve the availability of sustainable and affordable transport for people travelling to and within the Park.

8.4. An overview of all this work can be found in Appendix 1 - National Park Joint Response Visitor Management Plan 2024 which lays out the approach to managing the coming season and a table containing the key actions with indicative delivery timescales.

## **9. Cononish Gold Mine**

9.1. Members received an update at the December meeting and the following update is correct at the time of issuing the report. Planning and Access Committee have received regular updates on this matter.

9.2. The Mine Operating Company, SGZ Cononish Ltd, has not entered into administration. Members will recall this had been announced by the company as likely in public statements during Autumn 2023. Scotgold Resources Limited – the Australian based parent company – did enter into administration in November and this was widely reported in national media.

9.3. As shared at the December Board meeting, SGZ Cononish Ltd ceased production and put the mine site in a care and maintenance regime with a small number of staff employed to undertake these duties in September 2023. This remains the status of the operations at the mine site at this time.

9.4. The National Park Authority's regular liaison with the Operating Company continues, as does site monitoring. Regular dialogue with key stakeholders – Crown Estate Scotland, the landowner and SEPA has continued. The Operating Company was encouraged by the National Park Authority to provide updates to local community and other key stakeholders which it has undertaken.

9.5. One of the key areas of monitoring has been on water management on site which is also a focus for SEPA who is the regulatory body in respect of the authorised discharge from the site. Concerns were raised by the Park Authority with the Company in December following a site visit. This was in respect of the management of tailings and the need to maintain

the settlement ponds considering the typically wetter weather during the winter period. Remedial works were subsequently required by the National Park Authority and these are almost complete.

9.6. Members are reminded that the National Park Authority's interests are primarily in respect of compliance with the planning requirements set out in the conditions attached to the permission approved by the Board in February 2018 which is accompanied by a legal agreement that includes provision for a financial bond.

**Executive Sponsor/Author:** Gordon Watson, CEO