



CEO Report

Agenda Item 8

National Park Authority Board Meeting

11 December 2023

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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. Scottish Government

3.1. Visit by Lorna Slater MSP, Minister for Biodiversity, Green Skills and Circular Economy: Our Minister visited the National Park on 9th October. The main purpose of the visit was to launch the process for formal nominations to be made to be Scotland's next National Park. It is understood 11 expressions of interest had already lodged with the Scottish Government. The deadline for submissions is 29 February. National Park Authority staff are currently supporting Scottish Government officials to prepare advice and content about what the existing National Parks are achieving for their areas. A workshop for candidate areas is being held on 4th December which is being supported by staff and chaired by the Convener.

- 3.2. The visit also provided the opportunity for the Minister to receive presentations about the delivery of our Mission Zero Route Map (including a tour of the works at Carrochan) and on our work on Volunteering Engagement and Inclusion.
- 3.3. Visit by Tom Arthur MSP, Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance: Mr Arthur visited the National Park on 23rd October following a request for a meeting to discuss the implications of the proposed Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill for the National Park. The meeting was extremely useful to explore some of the practical issues that could arise in the National Park. The points raised with the Minister are summarised below.

4. Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill

- 4.1. The Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill is now at first stage and is being scrutinized by the Scottish Parliament's Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. The National Park Authority was approached to respond to the Call for Views by the Committee and on 15th September a submission set out some of the practical considerations that could raise issues for the National Park. The points raised have also been discussed with the National Park Destination Group members, local authority colleagues and other partner public bodies. A number of NPDG members and other businesses across the National Park also responded to the call for views.
- 4.2. If the Bill is introduced in 2026 as proposed, local authorities would be invited to set up a Visitor Levy across all or part of their region in order to generate additional funds from overnight visitors specifically to be invested by the local authority in tourism product, infrastructure and services. As it stands, the Bill makes no provision for National Parks to generate income from the Levy, nor does it place any obligation on Councils to consult or work alongside National Parks within their area to agree priority tourism projects or levels of expenditure. Currently, there is a real risk that National Parks may not benefit proportionately from the funds raised within their boundaries.
- 4.3. Initial soundings have been taken to understand the emerging thinking in the four local authorities that overlap the National Park. Argyll & Bute Council submitted a response to the Call for Views, acknowledging it would use its powers to generate funds. Stirling, West Dunbartonshire and Perth & Kinross Councils are still considering their response with members, and it is not yet clear regarding intentions to introduce a levy or how this would be handled in relation to the National Park. Any local authority choosing to apply the Levy would first be required to consult with their communities and local businesses.
- 4.4. In our comments and discussion particular emphasis was placed on the emerging NPPP and how the Visitor Levy could play a positive part in transforming our National Parks and other regional areas into more sustainable, low-carbon visitor destinations.
- 4.5. As an organisation with significant experience in tourism and visitor management, we also took the opportunity to discuss the Bill's definitions,

exemptions and operational systems from a broader perspective. In particular, we raised the issue of the National Park Authority operating three camp sites where we charge for overnight camping space and facilities within the Stirling Council area (as well as camping permit areas in all local authority areas), which could be recognised by the Bill as being ‘liable’ to collect Visitor Levy income and to establish recording and payment transfer systems. Given the important public benefit our camping management measures bring, the imposition of a levy on low-cost informal camping is questioned. This is an area being followed up directly with the Minister’s policy adviser this month.

4.6. It is possible that some local authorities covering the National Park may choose not to introduce a levy or that a fragmentation of approach could occur. With the National Park being a key tourism destination leading the way in Scotland to tackle Climate Emergency while welcoming over 4M visitors, contributing to major world-class events and generating over £420M pa to the local and national economy, it is important to see a consistent and well managed approach with a fair distribution of levies raised that support strategically beneficial and agreed priority projects and facilities.

4.7. Chaired by VisitScotland’s Director of Industry & Destination Development, the Scottish Government has set up an Expert Group to advise Ministers and develop Guidance on viable delivery options. Any views we develop as we consider the relative strengths and weaknesses of draft legislation, and the plans of our neighbouring authorities may be fed back to the Expert Group together with outline investment proposals demonstrating impact on Net Zero and the visitor economy.

5. Cononish Gold Mine

5.1. The operating company of the Cononish Gold Mine have made a series of public announcements in recent months regarding difficulties in their financial situation. Operations on site stopped in September and at the time of writing this report the site is in a care and maintenance regime. The latest public announcement by the company on the 22 November advised of a planned appointment of administrators for SGZ Cononish Limited. On the 24 November there was a statement by the Australian based parent company, Scotgold Resources Limited that it had appointed administrators.

5.2. 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. This bond is cash sum which the Park Authority holds in a separate bank account which can be accessed should the operator not fulfil its obligations to decommission and restore the site.

5.3. Members will be aware that the appointment of administrators, should this happen, is a process which aims to provide a framework for the orderly resolution of a company’s financial difficulties while maximizing returns to

creditors and, where possible, preserving viable businesses. Officers are proactively engaging with the operating company; it's care and maintenance team along with key partner organisations and our external specialist advisors to ensure the Park Authority is prepared for any implications or actions required in the weeks and months ahead at the site.

- 5.4. As further announcements and updates from the company are made Members will be updated as appropriate on any implications or considerations for the National Park Authority.

6. End of Season Report 2023

- 6.1. The End of Season Report 2023 attached at Appendix 1 is a cross partnership report which summarises the challenges, successes and insights gathered across the visitor season.
- 6.2. Overall, we have seen a more manageable season than recent years, but it is recognised that a combination of poorer weather and increased staffing resources on the ground have contributed towards the experience of all involved. The report indicated that visitor volumes remain higher than pre-pandemic 2019 levels and present a continuation of the steadily increasing visitor numbers we have observed over the past 10 years.
- 6.3. It is of note that there was continued high demand for camping in the National Park and bookings for both Permit Areas and for National Park Authority campsites remain considerably higher than in 2019. Also welcome is the continued demonstration of Ranger Service engagement which helps drive positive behaviours and improved compliance with the Camping Management Byelaws. Less than 1% of people whose details were taken for breaches to the camping byelaws had previously had their details taken across the last 3 years.
- 6.4. Alleged contraventions of the Loch Lomond Byelaws in 2023 were down by 28% on 2022 which is also considered to poorer weather alongside and a visible Ranger presence with focused engagement with loch users in busy hot spot areas.
- 6.5. The continued focus on improving effective and efficient deployment of staff has also seen an increase in Ranger time contributing to climate and nature related work. Alongside this our new Permanent Seasonal Ranger contracts have proved successful, reducing recruitment workload pressures, retaining valuable experienced Rangers, and provided additional job security and opportunities.
- 6.6. The Visitor Management partnerships forged regionally and nationally over the last three years continue to ensure regular and open discussion of issues, trends and improve forward planning and joint working. Close operational co-ordination with our Local Authorities, Police Scotland and Forest and Land Scotland continues to be highly effective. The National Visitor Management Steering Group continues to meet to monitor activity across the country. The

insights from this years' experiences will feed into our own planning for 2024 as well as influencing national priorities and funding.

Executive Sponsor/Author: Gordon Watson, CEO