

CEO Report

Agenda Item 10

National Park Authority Board Meeting

10 June 2024

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1. Purpose

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)

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

3. Scottish Government

3.1. Following his confirmation as new First Minister, John Swinney has announced his new Cabinet and associated ministerial responsibilities.

3.2. Mairi Gougeon MSP was reappointed Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, and has been given responsibility for National Parks.

3.3. The junior Minister reporting to Ms Gougeon is Jim Fairlie MSP who has been reappointed as Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity. We are

awaiting clarification as to whether National Parks will report to the Cabinet Secretary or the Minister.

3.4. Ms Gougeon previously had responsibility for National Parks when she served as Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment from June 2018 – December 2020.

3.5. Following the ending of the Bute House Agreement, it was expected that an updated Programme for Government would be announced. However, the calling of a UK General Election has meant that Scottish Government announcement now need to be deferred until after the election. The First Minister has highlighted his four main priorities as being; eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, tackling climate change and improving public services.

4. VisitScotland iCentres Closures

4.1. VisitScotland have announced a programme of phased closures of all remaining iCentres in Scotland will commence at the end of this visitor season with completion by March 2026.

4.2. This announcement will affect the two remaining iCentres in the National Park at Aberfoyle and Balloch. While the changing ways in which visitors are accessing information and bookings is a significant driver behind this decision, the announcement will nevertheless be a significant blow for the communities and destinations benefiting from these centres.

4.3. These iCentres will operate as normal for the 2024 season and a clearer idea of the timing of specific closures will begin to emerge in due course. In both cases the buildings occupied by the iCentres in the National Park are owned by public bodies (Balloch/Scottish Enterprise and Aberfoyle/Stirling Council). As has happened in Callander, we will try to facilitate local discussions to see if there is an appetite for other partnerships with local organisations to provide alternative visitor information or services before these premises are considered for other uses.

4.4. VisitScotland have stated that their focus will be on influencing visitors at the planning stage before they leave home with a digital-first strategy to attract visitors throughout the year and across Scotland, promoting lesser-known destinations and encouraging the spread of visitors. It is intended that iCentre staff will be redeployed and there will be no compulsory redundancies.

5. Corporate Plan Update

- 5.1. The Corporate Plan is a requirement under our Framework Agreement and will set out our strategic organisational aims, objectives and targets for the next 5 years for consideration by the Scottish Ministers. This Corporate Plan will explain how our organisation will set itself up to deliver the outcomes in the NPPP and what changes or developments are needed to do that.

In order to support the delivery of our NPPP the Corporate Plan will set out a clear vision for the type of organisation we need to be. It will provide Staff, Board Members and people with an interest in the Park Authority a clear view of our organisational strategic direction for the next 5 years.

Work to date has involved staff workshops in February to consider what is needed to deliver the NPPP, the output from which has been collated into four themes. We have agreed the role of the Corporate Plan in delivery of the NPPP outcomes and developed this thinking through discussions with the Exec and a small working group.

The emerging themes for the Corporate Plan are as follows:

- Leadership and Delivery
- Workforce Skills and Workplace Culture
- Organisational Systems and Processes
- Making the most of our resources

Over the summer, alongside work to agree the NPPP delivery structure and plan we will develop the Corporate Plan structure and content involving a wider staff group as relevant. We will use a session on the September Board Strategy day to introduce the draft Corporate Plan to Board Members and provide an opportunity for discussion. The final Corporate Plan will be presented for approval at the December Board meeting.

- 5.2. The finalisation of the Corporate Plan will also include how we intend to put some proposals into practice, particularly embedding the new National Park Partnership Plan structure into our budget and operational planning processes and well as performance monitoring and general resource management. The intention is that this will be followed through into our approach to our 2025/26 budget and Annual Operating Plan process and beyond.

6. Local Development Plan Update

- 6.1. An updated timeline for preparing the new local development plan has been published following consideration of this and approval by the Planning and Access Committee at their April 2024 meeting. This is contained within a document called a Development Plan Scheme which details the key stages and milestones involved in preparing the next Local Development Plan as well as opportunities to get involved or comment during plan preparation.
- 6.2. The role of the Local Development Plan is to set out how to manage development and the use of land in the National Park in the long-term public interest and to show how places will change in the future, including where development can and can't happen. The [Local Development Plan](#) and [National Planning Framework 4](#) jointly form the statutory development plan for the National Park and all planning application decisions are made in accordance with these unless there are material planning indications that indicate otherwise.
- 6.3. In regards to preparing the new local development plan, the Scottish Government expects this to take around 3-4 years, allowing the remainder of the duration of the ten year plan period to be focussed on supporting delivery. The process to prepare the new plan involves three main stages – Evidence Gathering, Plan Preparation and Delivery. We are at the evidence gathering stage at the moment and programming is generally structured around evidence gathering and reporting during 2024, plan preparation during 2025 and consultation and adopted during 2026 and into early 2027. There will be various types of engagement and consultation undertaken throughout this process and this is being considered at present as part of programme planning.
- 6.4. The first key milestone will be to prepare an Evidence Report which is programmed to be brought to the December National Park Authority Board meeting for approval and subsequent submission to the Scottish Government for scrutiny and review, following which we can proceed to prepare the proposed plan.

7. Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill

- 7.1. The Scottish Parliament has completed its third reading and passed the Visitor Levy Bill giving Local Authorities a new power to introduce a visitor levy to raise funding for local visitor facilities and services. The Bill aims to allow local authorities discretionary powers to apply a visitor levy, to be charged on overnight stays in some types of accommodation. Each local authority would be able to decide if it wants to introduce a charge and what the level of the charge should be. The legislation is programmed to be given Royal Assent by October 2024. An expert

advisory group, led by VisitScotland, is developing national guidance and best practice. The levy has the potential to provide an important new source of funds to help manage tourism sustainably within the National Park.

7.2. The key amendments to the Bill at its second stage reading, in relation to the Park Authority are -

- National Park Authorities are now proposed to be statutory consultees for Visitor Levy Schemes – Scottish Government can vary a scheme before approving.
- A Visitor Levy Scheme must have regard to a National Park Partnership Plan
- A Local Authority must consult the National Park Authority on proposals for distributing levy income.

7.3. National Park Officers facilitated a round-table meeting with our four Local Authority partners on 30 April, regarding the need to ensure a joined-up approach in the development and implementation of the Bill for both collection and the use of the funds in relation to the National Park. Each partner Local Authority is at an early stage in developing their position with regards to the Bill and how they plan to consult within their areas. The introduction of a visitor levy forms an important part of the local government fiscal framework.

7.4. Local Authorities that want to introduce a visitor levy will be able to do so after they have consulted with local communities, businesses and tourism organisations. An 18-month implementation period will then apply before any local authorities can introduce a visitor levy scheme in their area. This is to provide adequate time for local authorities and businesses to put in place the systems needed to collect and administer a levy.

7.5. When MSPs passed the Visitor Levy Bill following the Stage 3 parliamentary debate on 28 May some final amendments were made. An important amendment includes the requirement of a Visitor Levy Forum with representation of communities, businesses engaged in tourism and tourism organisations in the local area, to be formed by a local authority no later than six-months after its decision to introduce a scheme and to be maintained for the duration of scheme. Local Authorities will not be able to apply a Visitor Levy before 2026.

8. West Highland Way SCIO Update

8.1. The National Park Authority has been the lead body of the West Highland Way Management Group (also consisting of East

Dunbartonshire, Stirling, Argyll & Bute and Highland Council) for many years.

- 8.2. The Park Authority, on behalf of the Group appointed a specialist external lawyer in February 2023 to prepare a proposal paper on the establishment of a West Highland Way Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) as a sustainable way forward for managing and developing commercial and funding opportunities which will support business development and raise some income towards the management of the route.
- 8.3. National Park Authority officers have worked to further develop this proposal and hold discussions with the other members of the WHW Management Group to accelerate progress towards establishing the SCIO, including drafting budgets and a business plan. An application to OSCR is being prepared for submission by late June / early July this year.
- 8.4. To help take forward the initial set up phase, six individuals have been identified as interim trustees to sign the declaration for the application, including representatives from three of the authorities (the National Park Authority, Highland Council and Stirling Council); one from NatureScot; one from VisitScotland and one from the WHW business community. At this stage it is proposed that the National Park Authority is represented by the Director of Place during the initial set up phase.
- 8.5. Anderson Strathern is providing further legal advice on the SCIO application and draft constitution, along with contributions from Stirlingshire Voluntary Enterprise and other advisors as required (including the current WHW Management Group through Chair, Sue Hilder).
- 8.6. Once the application is submitted, it may take up to 90 days for a decision to be made by OSCR. Once a charity number is granted, further work will be required to transfer assets and staff (the WHW Business Development Manager) to the SCIO by 1 April 2025.
- 8.7. Once the SCIO is ready to take over its responsibilities, a report will be presented to the Board recommending how our representation should be handled and to formalise the transfer of some responsibilities currently undertaken by the National Park Authority.

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