



# CEO Report

## Agenda Item 8

### National Park Authority Board Meeting 30 September 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. Scottish Government

##### Scottish Government Spending Controls

3.1. The financial position across the whole of the public sector for 2024-25 continues to be extremely challenging, particularly in light of the pressures on pay. As a result the Scottish Government has taken action to reduce pressures in-year and the National Park Authority has been asked to contribute savings to ensure a balanced Scottish Government budget is delivered

- 3.2. This includes continuing to ensure that discretionary spend is tightly controlled. The current spend controls process (requiring an Accountable Officer business case to be submitted) for items over £100,000 will continue. However most of our large spend items have already been approved by Scottish Government and are now committed and so this does not affect most of the majority of big projects we are delivering this year. The development of a new National Park website is the main item that has had to be deferred. The anticipated Nature Restoration Fund amount requested for this year will also not now be received.
- 3.3. It is also requested that where underspends emerge or opportunities to reprioritise are identified these must be used to support the wider financial position rather than be repurposed for new work. Savings offered up so far are set out in the finance paper elsewhere on this agenda. Tight controls on marketing spend and discretionary spending including pausing external recruitment, hospitality, events and travel are now in place. Some recruitment for essential corporate posts has been undertaken.
- 3.4. The prospects for 2025/26 budgets continue to be challenging. The UK Government will be announcing a Budget on 30th October and this will be significant for the Scottish Government budget setting that will follow in December.

### **Programme for Government 2024/25**

- 3.5. On 4th September the First Minister announced the publication of the Programme for Government 24/25. This sets out actions to progress the four previously stated priorities of eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, tackling the climate emergency and ensuring high quality and sustainable public services. The document re-states the Scottish Government's commitment to tackle the twin climate and nature crises, noting that halting and reversing the biodiversity decline in our landscapes and seas is critical to our future environment.
- 3.6. There is a range of work set out where the National Park Authority has a strong role or interest. This includes continuing to make progress on protecting 30% of our land and seas for nature by 2030, bringing forward a Natural Environment Bill to establish the framework for statutory targets to restore and protect nature, restoring 10,000 hectares of degraded peatland, creating 10,000 hectares of woodland and delivering nature restoration funding across Scotland.
- 3.7. In a letter to public bodies, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, Mairi Gougeon MSP has set out the scope of the Natural Environment Bill to be introduced later this parliamentary year.

The Bill will address biodiversity loss, protect and restore the natural environment, including elements relating to national parks and deer management that sit within the Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands portfolio. These elements of the Bill are continuing the commitment to strengthen the leadership role of National Parks in tackling the interlinked crises of climate change and biodiversity loss and bring forward significant reforms to the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996, implementing many of the Deer Working Group recommendations. Members will recall the previous consultation carried out by NatureScot on potential changes to the National Parks (Scotland) Act which were discussed at the December 2023 Board meeting. The potential for National Park Authorities to have stronger enforcement powers in respect of byelaws is also still under consideration.

3.8. On 17th July, 2024, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, Mairi Gougeon MSP announced that Galloway has been confirmed as the proposed location for Scotland's third National Park with a further investigation to be carried out on its suitability. The joint proposal from the Galloway National Park Association and the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire UNESCO biosphere was selected from 6 bids that had progressed to final stage. NatureScot has been appointed to conduct a public consultation and investigation into whether Galloway should be designated as a National Park before submitting its findings to Ministers in April next year. The final report will also include recommendations on the boundary, powers and board size if the proposal is to be progressed to formal designation stage. NatureScot has since published its Reporter Plan. This marks just the beginning of the statutory process for designating a new National Park. As the Reporter, NatureScot is required to develop the detail of the proposal and to seek the views of local people and other stakeholders on it. This will include a 12-week period of formal consultation, probably from November 2024. Following this consultation NatureScot will report its advice to Ministers by 28th April, who will then decide whether to proceed by issuing a Draft Designation Order for further consultation before National Park status for the area is approved by the Scottish Parliament. The existing National Park Authority's are represented on an advisory group which is helping to guide the process.

#### **4. Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024**

4.1. The Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024 has now come into force. This will enable local authorities to apply a levy on overnight stays with all money raised to be reinvested in services and facilities largely used by tourists and business visitors. Councils that want to introduce a visitor levy will only be able to do so after they have consulted with local communities,

businesses and tourism organisations. The Act requires consultation with National Park Authorities and that proposals for how levy's will be invested must have regard to National Park Partnership Plans. 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 councils and businesses to put in place the systems needed to collect and administer a levy.

4.2. National Park Authority officers are continuing to engage with local authority colleagues to discuss and influence how plans are being developed in each of the four Council areas overlapping the National Park. Argyll and Bute Council have announced a working group of councillors to discuss and oversee the development of proposals. The proposed date for a visitor levy to start would be October 2026

## **5. Cononish Goldmine Update**

5.1. Members last received an update at the March Board meeting in the CEO Report. The majority of the Board also visited the Cononish site at the end of May. The care and maintenance regime at the Cononish site has continued by SGZ Cononish Ltd, the mine's Operating Company, whilst new investment and funding is being sought to bring the mine back into full operation.

5.2. Monitoring of the operations being undertaken has continued as has liaison with the company to ensure continued compliance with planning requirements. In preparation for the wetter autumn and winter weather the Operating Company have been reminded of the need to prepare the site, particularly in respect of clearance of the settlement ponds and have confirmed this will be undertaken.

5.3. Should SGZ Cononish Ltd secure new funding, or there be any change to the Operating Company, there are a number of requirements within planning conditions and the accompanying Section 75 legal agreement which protect the National Park Authority's interests in respect of planning matters.

## **6. Local Place Plans Registered**

6.1. Local Place Plans increase community capacity, collaboration and enhance social capital. They help envisage the future and stimulate community-based change. We have already used available Local Place Plans to inform the National Park Partnership Plan as they provide a rich

source of detailed community-level information. We will look to communities and their Local Place Plans to help us deliver the National Park Partnership Plan and respond to the climate and nature emergencies.

- 6.2. Across the National Park, 11 of our communities now have validated and registered Local Place Plans. Joining Arrochar & Tarbet, Callander, Drymen, Strathfillan, Balquhidder, Lochearnhead & Strathyre, Luss and Arden, St Fillans; earlier in the summer Strathard, Gartmore, Kilmarnock, and Lochgoil also had their Local Place Plans registered.
- 6.3. The communities of Trossachs, Croftamie, and East Loch Lomond are currently at different stages of engagement and collation, with their LPPs due to complete later this year/ early next. Croftamie and East Loch Lomond are also working with University of Stirling PhD student to support engagement activities on heritage as part of the process.
- 6.4. Steering groups are also set up or currently forming in Ardentinny, Port of Menteith and Balloch & Haldane and are looking to start work on their LPPs over the coming months.

## **7. The Race to Zero**

- 7.1. Loch Lomond and The Trossachs and The Cairngorms have joined the rest of the UK's 15 National Parks in becoming the first in the world to join the UN-backed 'Race to Zero' initiative, aiming to halve their global carbon emissions by 2030 and become significant net carbon sinks by 2050. The announcement in July builds on the collective adoption of a consistent carbon model used by all UK National Parks to help set net zero targets and drive policy and action to deliver these through National Park Plans.
- 7.2. The collective commitment from the 15 National Parks will transform an area almost 35 times the size of Glasgow (610,000 hectares), restoring the land on a huge scale, increasing its ability to capture carbon. This will see them work with partners and local communities on nature-friendly practices, sustainable travel, renewable energy and sustainably-produced food.
- 7.3. Collectively, Loch Lomond & The Trossachs and Cairngorms National Parks restored over 1,793 hectares of peatland in 2023/2024. This vital restoration helps turn degraded peatland that is emitting carbon and other greenhouse gases into one which locks them up and over time, absorbs them from the atmosphere.

7.4. The approval of our new National Park Partnership Plan which sets out a long-term vision and a wide range of measures required for the National Park to reach net zero by 2035 including more tree planting, sustainable transport services and affordable housing for local people.

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