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**CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY**

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**FOR DECISION**

**Title: ESTABLISHMENT OF A VISITOR GIVING SCHEME  
FOR THE CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK**

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**Purpose**

This paper presents proposals for establishment of a Visitor Giving Scheme for the Cairngorms National Park.

**Recommendations**

**The Board is asked to:**

- a) **Agree in principle to support establishment of a Visitor Giving Scheme for the National Park**
- b) **Agree the proposals identified in paragraph 14 that will guide establishment of the Scheme**
- c) **Note that the Scheme will be launched following a development phase and further consideration by the Finance & Delivery Committee**

## ESTABLISHMENT OF A VISITOR GIVING SCHEME FOR THE CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK – FOR DECISION

### Strategic Context

1. Investment in tourism infrastructure in Scotland, beyond the accommodation and catering sectors, generally comes from projects that are led by local or national park authorities, assisted by national and European funding programmes. With increasing pressure on public sector budgets, rising costs and changes to some national funding programmes there is renewed interest in attracting new sources of funding for development and resource-maintenance projects.
2. Recent experience has highlighted the continued availability of capital finance for development of new infrastructure and also for large scale maintenance programmes such as the Mountains and The People Programme. However, with the planned exit from the EU, availability of future funding is now uncertain, both from the loss of EU funds and from significantly increased competitiveness for remaining domestic funding such as from Heritage Lottery Funds. Beyond capital investment such as this, the lack of revenue funds available for regular and planned maintenance has been a key strategic issue. Lack of maintenance funding has often led to a requirement for a cycle of high value capital investment in infrastructure such as paths and visitor facilities, where existing visitor assets deteriorate to the extent that they require full replacement. This situation is not sustainable and a Visitor Giving Scheme potentially offers one means of addressing this strategic issue.
3. The Cairngorms National Park is an internationally accredited sustainable tourism destination and the need for continued investment in infrastructure is clear. For example, there are over 650 miles of Core Paths in the National Park and expenditure on upland paths (Cairngorms Mountain Heritage & Mountains & People) and Speyside Way extension alone amounts to £5m. Annual maintenance of these alone at 2.5% would be £125,000. We know from intensive visitor surveys that these paths are essential in providing so much of what visitors want to do when they visit the National Park – and they help visitors enjoy the Park in environmentally sustainable ways and support many businesses. This infrastructure underpins the environmental, social and economic sustainability of the National Park.
4. In the last three years there has been growing concern about the pressure that tourism growth is placing on the environment and existing infrastructure – for example on the “North Coast 500” scenic route and on Skye.

5. In response to this general situation the Scottish Government launched the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund in April 2018 with £6M of funding available over two years through local and national park authorities to places that are suffering from acute tourism pressure. In the Cairngorms expressions of interest have been submitted by CNPA, in cooperation with partners, for two projects: in Glenmore and at Muir of Dinnet National Nature Reserve. One further application relating to parking in Ballater will be submitted by Aberdeenshire Council. The outcome of these applications should be known by October 2018.
6. Meanwhile, some local authorities have been discussing the potential for direct taxation of visitors in order to raise funds for investment in tourism infrastructure. For example, The Highland Council estimates that £10M could be raised annually through a £1 per night levy on visitors. Such an approach would require new primary legislation. There is currently little evidence of support from the tourism industry – there is 73% opposition according to research published in May 2018 by Federation of Small Businesses. The Scottish Government has recently confirmed there are no plans to introduce a visitor levy on the tourism sector, noting that the industry is already subject to the second highest VAT rates in Europe.
7. In other parts of Scotland, (e.g. Loch Ness and Inverness) an alternative approach has been developed to raise revenue by creating a “Tourism Business Improvement District”. This approach raises a compulsory levy from businesses following a ballot to demonstrate that there is sufficient support. An organisation then takes the lead to deliver a business plan which promotes tourism generally and improves the tourism infrastructure. There are plans to develop a similar approach in the Moray Council area to support the Moray Speyside tourism destination, including part of the National Park. A consultation will take place starting later in June and a ballot of businesses is programmed for March 2019.

### **Strategic Policy Considerations**

8. The Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan 2017 contains a commitment to “Develop new ways, including visitor giving, to fund infrastructure investment and maintaining key off-road routes...”
9. In the development of the Sustainable Tourism Action Plan in 2017 the CNPA and the Cairngorms Business Partnership agreed to lead on development of “...an approach to enable businesses, visitors and communities to engage in the management and maintenance of the natural assets and visitor infrastructure through interpretation, volunteering opportunities and donations”. In relation to the volunteer element of this commitment, the Park volunteer programme has been developed with support

from the Leader programme and 14 volunteer rangers have been recruited, contributing an estimated 133 volunteer days last year and with a target of 500 days per annum.

10. The sustainable tourism experts who were appointed by the Europarc Federation in May 2017 to assess the National Park's re-application for the "European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas" noted that:

*"The CNP have a very good network of paths that is being constantly improved, but there is uncertainty of availability of funds – especially public funds – to maintain the network in the future. On the other hand, there is also a need for conservation activities and projects to maintain the status and level of attraction of the National Park as a nature and outdoor activity destination. Nowadays, the Park is receiving almost 1.7 million visitors per year; these visitors could contribute to the conservation and maintenance of the National Park. Most of them would probably be glad to make a contribution to the singular place they have enjoyed so much. **The challenge here is to design a visitor-friendly scheme, with low administrative costs and high transparency; where tourism businesses and local entities should be actively involved.**"*

11. In the Park-wide Visitor Survey (2014/15) 49% of respondents agreed, or agreed strongly, with the statement "I would consider donating a little time or money to help local conservation projects".
12. The CNPA, working with members of the Cairngorms Tourism Partnership, has commissioned various reviews of best practice with Visitor Giving Schemes elsewhere in the UK and reviewed relevant research reports and toolkits from DEFRA, Visit England and others – a general summary of best practice is at **Annex 1**. Staff have also surveyed other National Parks through the UK Tourism Group and have a good level of information about how other National Parks, and other key destinations (e.g. Arran) are benefitting from such schemes.
13. It is notable that, although there is currently no Park-wide Visitor Giving Scheme in place in the Cairngorms National Park, some efforts are being made to raise funds from voluntary contributions to invest in the Park. Some individual businesses do have voluntary giving options as part of their service and have arrangements in place to donate the money to good causes, some of which are related to the National Park (e.g. Wilderness Scotland). The total sum invested in the Park from such schemes is not known.
14. Also, there is a range of national fundraising campaigns based on making voluntary contributions to Park-related projects – e.g. the "Mend our Mountains" Campaign by the British Mountaineering Council is raising funds for the for Beinn a'Ghlo path, near

Blair Atholl, amongst others, and is sponsored by Park-based businesses, including WalkHighlands.

15. A summary of the visitor and business context within the National Park is provided at **Annex 2**.

### **The Proposed Scheme**

16. Discussions have taken place with partners, largely through a small working group that has met over the last year, involving Cairngorms Business Partnership and The Cairngorms Trust.
17. Given the information that we have about best practice elsewhere, it is clear that all the existing Visitor Giving Schemes have identified the opportunities and face more-or-less the same challenges. The proposal is therefore framed in terms of six critical success factors that have been identified and which are highlighted below.
- a) **Keep administrative costs low and maximise the benefits** – experience elsewhere highlights the risk of administration costs consuming a considerable proportion of the total funds raised from donors. To address this we propose to:
- Develop a scheme that makes most use of existing Park-wide organisations and the structures that we have in the Park – with the principal parties being the Cairngorms Trust (an established charity), the Cairngorms Business Partnership (CBP) and the CNPA
  - Cover administration costs, as far as possible, through linkages to staff existing work programmes and, if necessary, providing staff support from existing CNPA staff resources as we do for other community and voluntary organisations and activities.
- b) **Strong leadership and clear and transparent governance** – several organisations will be involved and there needs to be clear and transparent governance arrangements in place to minimise the risks to all parties and build confidence amongst all relevant partners and donors. To address this issue we propose to:
- Invite all the principal parties to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) setting out roles and responsibilities, the guidelines and mechanisms by which it will be decided what projects are supported, etc. For CNPA the MoU will be approved by the Finance and Delivery Committee.

- Establish a VGS Partnership Group to oversee management of the Scheme and compliance with the MoU.
  - Encourage development of a Business Plan for the Scheme for a period of three to five years to set targets and priorities (e.g. which projects to fund, which business sectors to work with most closely, etc.)
  - Transfer the lead role for development of the Scheme, at an appropriate point, to the Cairngorms Trust – this will bring benefits in terms of separation from public sector duties and transparency, accountability through processes that are managed by OSCR.
  - Develop simple procedures for any business willing to become involved in promoting the Scheme.
  - Update the CNPA Board and all stakeholders on progress with the Scheme annually, including the total funds raised, numbers of businesses participating.
- c) **Business support for the Scheme** – this is a key issue in the National Park and the success of the Scheme will significantly rely on promotion by businesses – especially as neither CNPA nor the Cairngorms Trust have daily direct face-to-face contact with visitors. A summary of the results of a survey that was undertaken through the CBP Business Barometer is available at **Annex 3**. This shows that around half of businesses indicated that they would be willing to participate in some way and this has been confirmed by the direct discussion staff have had with businesses. The survey also recorded a range of comments that are useful to see the factors that businesses consider to be important – e.g. transparency in expenditure, separation from public sector duties, etc. The CBP position statement is attached at **Annex 4**. Discussions also took place with the SCDI, who support the Scheme in principle, and with the Federation of Small Businesses who noted *“The FSB understands the need for additional and ongoing investment in the Cairngorms National Park’s natural assets, especially in light of the funding pressures facing the public sector. As such, we are sympathetic to the proposal for a business-friendly, visitor giving scheme. However, given the current attempts by a number of local authorities to introduce a tourism tax, we are unable, at the moment, to fully support the proposal”*. To address this issue we propose to:
- Work positively with the Cairngorms Business Partnership as a partner in the Scheme and with individual businesses who wish to support the Scheme. The CBP have strong membership representation within the National Park and operate the website VisitCairngorms.com and several social media channels which give good opportunities to encourage visitors to contribute.
  - Develop a range of levels for individual businesses to become involved in promoting the Scheme, for example :
    - i. Basic – where a business promotes the Scheme and refers customers to a dedicated website or text-giving facility

- ii. Intermediate – where a business works the Scheme to integrate payments into their existing booking or payment system
  - iii. Advanced – where a business uses or promotes specific technology dedicated to the Scheme to make it easy for customers to make donations.
- Link the Scheme to the use of the National Park brand image by setting a positive expectation that if using the National Park brand to promote a business, then the Scheme should be promoted to visitors.
  - Develop the Scheme incrementally based on pilot projects, learning from experience, and building support from businesses and donors over time.
- d) **Making it easy for people to contribute** – we need to make this as easy as possible. People are most likely to contribute if the payment system is easy to administer and people are asked to make contributions at the point when they are making payment for other goods or services. To address this issue we propose to:
- Collect funds as far as possible using digital means, linked to existing payment systems and avoiding cash
  - Develop dedicated fundraising approaches based on use of digital technology including integration with apps with locational capability (e.g. apps that are being developed for Badenoch Great Place Scheme and Snow Roads project)
  - Endeavour to build ongoing relationships with customers to complement one-off donations
  - Make the Scheme attractive to anyone who loves the Cairngorms National Park.
- e) **Encouraging donations towards practical work that people care about and can see is delivered** – the research shows that people are most likely to contribute towards projects that relate to the special qualities of the destination and to its active enjoyment. To address this issue we propose to:
- Raise funds generally for two themes: Recreation/Access (e.g. paths and bridges) and Nature/Landscape conservation projects (e.g. native woodland creation). Both of these are strongly related to the reasons why visitors say they come to visit the National Park
  - Ensure that a small portfolio of specific flagship projects are developed and highlighted for funding through specific campaigns – these will change over time as the projects are delivered
  - Ensure that the projects to be delivered are well distributed around the National Park

f) **High visibility of the Scheme and the work it supports** – it is essential that the Scheme has a high profile and that visitors, and the businesses promoting the Scheme, can easily see the practical effects of the contributions made. To address this issue we propose to:

- Brand the Scheme as #LoveCairngorms (subject to further market testing)
- Develop a range of specific communications materials to encourage people to contribute and make them aware of the impact of donations
- Integrate the messaging of the Scheme in relevant publications, websites and project work that are administered by the principal parties
- Support the Scheme generally through CNPA's overall approach to communications as noted in the Communications and Engagement Strategy.

### **Next steps**

18. If the Board agree the recommendations the next step will be to work with the other principal parties (The Cairngorms Trust, CBP and CNPA) to draw up the Memorandum of Understanding and draft business plan and to make further contacts with businesses regarding participate in the Scheme. The Cairngorms Trust are in the process of recruiting a new Trust Manager and once they are in place we anticipate they will be able to lead development the Scheme.

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