CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY
PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE

FOR DISCUSSION

Title: **CAIRNGORMS FOOTPATH MAINTENANCE**

Prepared by: **COLIN SIMPSON, HEAD OF VISITOR SERVICES & ACTIVE TRAVEL**

Purpose

This paper presents an overview of the approach being developed to prioritise maintenance of the National Park's path network.

Recommendation

The Performance Committee is asked to note the proposed process for identifying future path maintenance priorities.

Background

1. The Cairngorms National Park contains many miles of paths and tracks of which just over 600 miles are classed as "Core Paths" in the Core Path Plan that was approved by the National Park Board and adopted in March 2015. Under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, National Park Authorities have a statutory duty to produce a Core Path Plan that defines a system of paths that are considered sufficient for the purpose of giving the public reasonable access throughout their area. Although the Act also gives the National Park Authority the power to maintain core paths if they wish, responsibility for doing so and any legal liabilities still rest with the landowner.

Current system

2. At present the National Park Authority have path maintenance agreements in place on a number of sections of path for historic reasons. Typically this would occur where a new path was built and either grant conditions or the agreement with the landowner concerning construction necessitated this. Due to its designation as one of Scotland's four National Long Distance Routes, the National Park Authority also has a direct obligation to maintain 16.5km of the Speyside Way (of which 72km falls within the National Park). Although not formally responsible for the route in the same way, there is also a specific focus on the Deeside Way as extending the route to Braemar is a NPPP4 priority. Each year the National Park Authority makes a budget allocation to cover the following areas of work: -

   • General path maintenance

- Speyside Way maintenance and improvement
- Deeside Way maintenance and improvement
- Core paths and other paths improvements

3. In broad terms the first of these budgets is used to cover more basic routine maintenance activities such as strimming and vegetation clearance where contracts are let for the year. The remaining budgets are designed to allow more significant interventions to be made to improve the quality of a route such as repairing or rebuilding damaged or poor sections of path and replacement of gates or other route furniture such as signposts. For more significant projects such as the rebuilding of 3km of the Speyside Way through Anagach Woods undertaken in late 2022 external grant funding is often sourced.

4. While the current system of maintenance and improvements to the path network has broadly worked, it has also been recognised that further improvements could be made. While some work will always be required due to unforeseen events such as storm damage, much of the improvement activity is based on information that has come from the CNPA ranger service or partner rangers who are those "on the ground". However Ranger patrols, particularly in recent years, have been focussed on locations facing visitor management pressures and so, while some routes will be visited very frequently, others in less pressured areas are not.

Future proposals

5. With a ranger service that currently includes 5 permanent rangers, 11 seasonal rangers and further trainees it makes sense to continue to use the local knowledge and skills of the ranger service to identify priorities. However, a more formal system to ensure that all routes are visited periodically is being established and is supported by a new GIS based system that will store mapping and data regarding each route as well as details such as the date of previous and programmed inspections to assist in managing future maintenance. The new GIS based data storage system was developed as was a mobile tablet based system for gathering and inputting data that was tested by one of the rangers in late 2022.

6. This system allows a ranger to walk (or potentially cycle) a route, gathering and recording data on aspects such as route condition as well as recording assets such as bridges signposts and their precise location while out in the field. This data is subsequently synchronised with the GIS. In the initial phase the ranger's role is largely to undertake a visual inspection of the route and to record the location of other assets in order to fully populate the GIS. Where a third party is responsible for a route or any asset information on any actions required will continue to be passed to the responsible party as occurs at present.

7. In subsequent years, the visual inspection will be all that is required but where certain types of assets are concerned – most notably bridges (CNPA is responsible for 6 of which 5 are on the Speyside Way), a periodic engineering survey is also commissioned. Similarly, where a routine visual inspection suggests there may be an issue, additional specialist inspections can be commissioned.

8. Information added to the GIS will in future be used to prioritise future work. Ultimately this is intended to ensure the core path network remains fit for purpose and to establish a programme of improvements, largely focused on improving signage and waymarking and removing barriers, that in turn would increase the proportion of the network that is fit for its intended use. In the short term much of the focus will be on low ground paths as these make the most significant contribution to other NPPP4 ambitions such as providing greater access for wider range of abilities and encouraging walking as a means of improving or maintaining health.

Other support for path improvements

9. The National Park Authority will also continue to provide some support (including in some cases grant aid) to others such as community groups that undertake a path project. This is likely to include the Outdoor Access Trust for Scotland (OATS) who undertake significant repair work on upland paths and provide volunteering opportunities in areas such as path building thereby complementing the National Park Authority's direct investment.

Colin Simpson
13 February 2023
colinsimpson@cairngorms.co.uk

Appendix: - Data entry screen from tablet and subsequent GIS map of features