



## For information

**Title: CEO Report and Convener Update**

**Prepared by: Grant Moir, Chief Executive**

### Purpose

To highlight to Board Members the main strategic areas of work that are being directed by Management Team. These are areas where significant staff resources are being directed to deliver with partners the aspirations of the National Park Partnership Plan.

### Nature and Climate Change

1. **Landscape-scale partnerships:** Earlier this year, the Park Authority convened meetings to coordinate landscape scale collaboration involving the public, private and charitable sectors with mutual objectives for land and water management in the upper Dee catchment and Angus Glens respectively.

Collaboration in the Dee catchment will bring together an Action Plan for management in the catchment that would deliver at a landscape scale across the multiple, inter-related objectives of water quality, flow, flood resilience, abstraction, improving natural capital and ecosystem services, restoration and improving biodiversity, and salmon survival. Similarly the Angus Glens partnership has objectives to coordinate across three key themes of natural capital, community wealth-building and visitor services. Work starting in 2024 will focus on taking a natural capital based approach to land use decision making.

2. **Peatland restoration:** Of the 15 projects scheduled for delivery 2023 – 24, 13 are complete or have machines currently working on the ground. We are currently on track to achieve the 2023 – 24 target of 1300ha of peatland under restoration. Contractor capacity has grown and is not currently a limiting factor although it may become so again as the number of projects we aim to deliver continues to increase. Landowner enthusiasm remains high across the entire range of land management objectives and the 2024 - 25 pipeline of activity represents a forecast of more than 1500ha.



3. **Moorland management:** The Wildlife Management and Muirburn Bill continues to work through Holyrood. The Stage 1 debate on this Bill is scheduled for 29 November. The Bill is likely to introduce a Licensing system for the shooting of grouse, underpinned by a Grouse Moor Management Code. led by Nature Scot. Cairngorms National Park Authority sit on a Working Group, led by Naturescot, to develop the Code. The East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership continues to be a key vehicle for demonstrating sustainable moorland management. Current East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership projects are to remove redundant deer fencing, to protect aspen and to monitor moorland biodiversity.

4. **Species recovery:**

a) **Beaver-** Over the last 9 months the Park Authority has undertaken extensive engagement on the proposal to bring beavers back to the Cairngorms. Following the summer programme of six informal drop ins, landowner meetings, press releases and social media coverage, the six week formal engagement has ended. 515 people responded online, more than 100 people came to one of the six in person events and staff and partners conducted 37 site visits to farms and land managers.

75.8% of respondents to the formal engagement were supportive of bringing beavers back to the Cairngorms. Those who were not supportive had concerns regarding impacts on fisheries and productive farmland, and the applicability of mitigation schemes, specifically impacts on the flood bank. All concerns raised formally as part of the engagement formed part of the licence application. Any further issues raised informally or after the consultation ended have been passed to NatureScot. Park Authority staff continue to work with NatureScot and meet regularly with land managers to inform an adaptive approach which covers any emerging issues. The application was passed to NatureScot for their consideration on the 20 October. A decision is expected by the end of November.

More information on beaver ecology, key issues, FAQs and the full engagement report and landowner responses can be found on the [Park Authority webpage](#).

b) **Capercaillie** - The National Lottery Heritage funded Cairngorms Capercaillie Project is drawing to a close and on track to achieve all its aims to raise awareness; build understanding; empower communities; improve habitat; and



provide resources to help secure a long-term future for capercaillie in the UK. A comprehensive evaluation of the project is underway to identify impacts and learning that will support coordinated action in future as the focus now moves to the next phase of work for capercaillie. As requested by the Minister, the next phase of work for capercaillie involves the Park Authority and NatureScot working with stakeholders to create a coordinated action plan. The plan, which will be in place by the spring, will take forward short-term emergency actions and longer-term actions to continue securing a future for capercaillie in the UK.

**Nature of Scotland awards** - 'Saving the Pine hoverfly from extinction' has been shortlisted for the Nature of Scotland Awards Innovation Award. This is a partnership project between Royal Zoological Society Scotland, RSPB Scotland and Park Authority. Cairngorms projects are well represented, also shortlisted: River Dee Trust- One Million Trees campaign; Rottal Estate- Restoring the Rottal Burn; Dee District Salmon Fishery Board and River Dee Trust- Restoring the Dee Catchment; Mar Lodge – Reviving the Glens, Bens, and Burns, and Cairngorms Connect predator research.

## Visitor Services and Active Travel

5. **Active Cairngorms Action Plan:** The Action Plan is presented to the Board for approval at the November meeting.
6. **Paths and Long-distance Routes:**
  - a) **Speyside Way** – staff are in the process of securing a contractor to upgrade the existing Speyside Way north of Aviemore. The works include path resurfacing, implementation of drainage repairs, fencing and ancillary works. The Speyside Way which will remain open throughout the duration of the work which should be complete before end of February.
  - b) **Community Path Leaflets** – staff have been working to refresh the path leaflet template in light of the new National Park branding guidelines. Carrbridge leaflet will be published shortly, followed by Strathdon and Laggan.
  - c) **October Storms** - after the flooding at the beginning of October and Storm Babet staff have been out assessing the impacts of the flooding and storms on paths and key popular visitor locations to support land managers. Whilst damage was



limited there are detailed surveys and repairs to be undertaken over the coming months. A new procedure note is being prepared for discussion with Managing for Visitors Group to assist with storm recovery work.

7. **Ranger Services:** Cairngorms National Park Authority Ranger Service patrols continued until the end of October when the seasonal rangers finished. The spells of stormy weather and flooding in October reduced levels of activity and so patrols were generally quiet. Rangers were deployed to assist with activity such as path and safety inspections following flood events. Cairngorms National Park Authority organised the Annual Ranger Gathering of all Ranger Services at Glenmore Lodge in October which was well attended and focused on promoting collaboration. Looking forwards, Ranger Service activity is presented in the Active Cairngorms Action Plan for approval at the November Board meeting.
8. **Visitor Infrastructure:** A number of grant offers have been made to partners through the Visitor Infrastructure Improvement Programme with work anticipated to be undertaken on all of these over the next four months. Detailed summary is presented in the Active Cairngorms Action Plan paper at the November Board meeting. Tenders have been sought for a Spey access point study and condition surveys of the Old Logging Way and Meall a Bhuachaille hill path.
9. **Volunteering and Health Walks:** The Volunteer gathering was held in Grantown with reduced numbers due to ongoing weather alerts. Discussions focused on review the summer season, planning the year ahead, and an updates on the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and on wider issues to do with the management of visitors. The network of volunteers continue to do an excellent job for the Park and are always looking to do more. Plans are being made to open recruitment for our next intake of Volunteer Rangers in December, ready for new member of the team to be on the ground in Spring. 12 new volunteer Health Walk Leaders will be joining to manage Health Walks across Badenoch and Strathspey.
10. **Youth Action Team:** Members of the Youth Action Team attended the Europarc conference in the Netherlands. The Team also attended the Scottish Rural and Islands Youth Parliament in Fort William where they played a starring role in presenting the outcomes of the discussion sessions to decision makers. Ten specific themes were identified as a focus for future activity including need to support young carers in rural areas – we have 70 in Badenoch and Strathspey alone. Ellie Moore from the Cairngorms was then selected to present their work to the full Scottish



Rural Parliament in the following days and sat on a panel alongside Deputy First Minister where Cairngorms National Park was identified as a key part of Scotland that has trail-blazing reputation for rural youth action.

**11. Active and Sustainable Travel:** Over 100 active travel infrastructure projects in and between communities have been identified through the Cairngorms 2030 development work. A strategic plan that lays out the approach to delivery to 2045 is currently being produced to be presented to Cairngorms National Park Authority Board in March 2024. There will be significant changes to the way active travel funding is going to be dispersed by Transport Scotland from 2024 onwards but we are still awaiting confirmation of details. Planning application for the Dulnain Bridge to Grantown on Spey path was submitted late Oct and intention is to commence construction in 24/25.

## Planning and Rural Development

**12. Local Development Plan:** The CommonPlace webpages and interactive online map that was used to promote early engagement in the Local Development Plan had received around 100 comments and around 100 reactions to content by early October. The site has received more than 2000 visitors and the social media posts that link to it has been seen nearly 70,000 times, with people actively engaging in it more than 5000 times – plans are in place to speak to several community groups soon in preparation for more stages of engagement in 2025.

**13. Planning Casework:** At the September planning committee, members agreed to approve ambitious plans to renovate and extend the Invercauld Arms Hotel in Braemar and to create a community managed caravan site in Tomintoul. At the November planning committee an application in principle for housing at the MacDonald Resort in Aviemore and detailed applications for a new distillery west of Laggan, a temporary construction compound, new forest track and a community path link near Braemar were approved.

**14. Wellbeing Economy:** The Cairngorms Economic Steering Group met in late September and discussed the development of the Wellbeing Economy Action Plan. Further meetings of the steering group and subgroup are scheduled for November and December. The Cairngorms Business Partnership Conference was held on 6 November and was well-attended; keynote speeches covered 20 years of the National Park and the use of Artificial Intelligence. Craig Mills is due to take over as



new CEO of Cairngorms Business Partnership in January 2024 to follow Mark Tate who stands down in late November.

**15. Community Led Local Development:** The Park Authority will be hosting a community event in December for all community councils, associations and development trusts. The purpose is to develop a new way of sharing information with all communities and to allow them to share good practice with each other, as well as provide a forum for feedback. This role was once partly fulfilled by the Association of Cairngorms Communities which is being closed down. New approaches will be found to ensure that that as many representatives of community groups can participate as possible.

**16. Sustainable Tourism Action Plan:**

Cairngorms National Park Authority has received official notification from Europarc that our re-application for the *European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas* has been successful. The National Park will be re-accredited with the Charter until 2028. The Cairngorms Tourism Partnership will discuss the verifiers report and recommendations in mid- November and Xander McDade (Cairngorms Tourism Partnership Chair) will be attending the awards ceremony at the European Parliament in Brussels in late November.

**17. Business and Visitor Data:**

Staff are currently tendering for the next Cairngorms Visitor Survey, along with a new additional survey of National Park residents. Going forwards we plan to undertake two separate waves of research over the next five years to provide more relevant information.

The latest quarterly report from the [Cairngorms Business Barometer](#) shows business confidence increasing compared with recent trends, with higher visitor numbers, partly driven by overseas visitors, and increased turnover. However, supplier costs, staffing and particularly bureaucracy continue to be identified as barriers to growth. The topical questions in this survey related to the potential introduction of a Visitor Levy - while slightly more businesses said they opposed rather than supported the introduction of the levy, opinions were fairly mixed, and attitudes varied according to how the revenue would be spent and who would be responsible for making such decisions.



## Communications

**18. Active Cairngorms:** We have been working with the Cairngorms Business Partnership and the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project to help businesses encourage their customers to enjoy the National Park responsibly. The campaign consists of social media assets and a series of videos featuring standup comedian, author and regular Cairngorms visitor Ed Byrne. These have now been shared with Cairngorm Business Partnership's members and stakeholders, and will be rolled out digitally over the coming weeks. [The campaign materials and landing page can be found here.](#)

Our third responsible access campaign with Ramblers Scotland came to an end on 31 August after an 18-week period. Three ads ran in total targeting 16- to 25-year-olds based in Scotland across TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. In total the campaign achieved over 8.5m impressions, 2.9m views and an impressive 160,000 video completions, almost all reaching younger visitors we struggle to reach via other means.

**19. Cairngorms Nature:** The six-week formal engagement period on beavers took place from 15 August to 25 September. In addition to drop-in events, the public were invited to comment via a dedicated online survey, which attracted around 500 responses, over two thirds of which were strongly in favour of returning beavers to the Cairngorms National Park. The process was supported digitally by a total of 64 posts across the National Park and Cairngorms Nature social media channels, achieving a reach of over 80k, 33k video views and nearly 10k engagements, likes, reactions, shares and comments.

PR activity included the announcement of the [formal engagement period](#), a reminder for people to [complete our online survey](#) and a [summary of responses](#) ahead of the licence application being submitted. Coverage for the project has been extensive, with articles appearing in the Daily Mail, Telegraph, Herald, Daily Record, National and Scottish Farmer, and interviews with Park Authority staff also featuring across BBC and STV News.

In late August, we worked closely with colleagues from Scottish Government, NatureScot and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority to announce a [new £550,000 Nature Restoration Fund](#). The announcement was the centrepiece of Lorna Slater MSP's visit to the National Park and was covered by



outlets including STV, The Scotsman, Aberdeen Live and Scottish Farmer. We also supported Scottish Government on the launch of the nominations process for new national parks, including an interview on STV with Sandy Bremner.

We took part in Scottish Government's annual Climate Week at the end of September, attempting to break down some of the jargon around net zero through [an interview with our Peatland Operations Manager Emma Stewart](#). The piece explains clearly what we mean when we talk about net zero and highlights its potential impact on the National Park, demonstrating how our work contributes to broader, national ambitions around tackling the nature and climate crisis.

- 20. Public engagement:** We continued our tour of major shows and games this summer at the Grantown Show in August and the Lonach Gathering later in the month. Across the two events we engaged with more than 500 people and local children made hundreds of seed bombs to take home with them. Over the next 12 months we will continue to attend select shows across the National Park, with the Ballater Winter Festival next on the list on 25 November. We are also organising an informal drop-in style event in Grantown for early January.

Following their successful visit back in May, we were delighted to welcome back Black Scottish Adventurers in late August, this time to explore the east of the National Park. We worked closely with partner ranger services in Balmoral and Glen Tanar to support the visit, which saw around 90 adventurers come to the area, many for the first time. Glen Tanar's Head Ranger Eric Baird even produced a short video to mark the occasion – see <https://www.instagram.com/p/CwNsEACoGeo/>

Linked to our Cairngorms 2030 climate learning and education project and inspired by our [10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Orchards project](#), we have been working with Alford Academy and Grantown Grammar to create new orchards on their school grounds, with the help of pupils themselves. Weather-dependent, work is likely to take place over the next few months.

- 21. Corporate communications:** Work has started on a new Gaelic Language Plan for the Cairngorms National Park Authority, in line with our public sector Gaelic language duty. We have agreed a set of key priorities with Bòrd na Gàidhlig to increase the use of Gaelic, the learning of Gaelic and promote a positive image of Gaelic, with a draft plan likely to go out for a six-week public consultation in early





2024. Particular attention will be paid to how the Park Authority can use its influence to encourage partners to adopt Gaelic in their everyday work.

Plans for a 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary podcast series were thwarted due to an unexpected price hike from our preferred supplier; however, having approached a number of participants we decided to explore alternative ways of marking the occasion. With limited notice, award-winning Scottish poet John Glenday – who has written extensively about the Cairngorms, as well as working across the Highlands in his day job as an addictions counsellor – has agreed to write a poem inspired by the people and nature of the National Park. The poem is due to be completed in mid-November, with the results being filmed shortly after (narrated by a 20 year old born in the National Park).

In the wake of devastating wildfires across the globe, we worked with the Press and Journal to publish an [opinion piece with Grant Moir](#) on how we can tackle the nature and climate crisis here in the Cairngorms National Park. Other media stories included the promotion of our [Local Development Plan consultation](#), two [new affordable housing developments](#) being approved, [tourist accommodation in Braemar and Tomintoul](#) getting the go-ahead, and a piece from Grant Moir to mark the [20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Park](#).

**22. Website and social media:** Work has now started on developing a new website for the Cairngorms National Park, a process which is expected to take around 12 months. The initial stages have included a series of workshops with key target audiences to better understand their needs; a detailed analysis of the performance of the existing website, including its environmental efficiency; a design review; and exploring which content management system the website should be built on. Whereverly have also spoken to various key partners (including the Cairngorms Business Partnership) and staff members to better understand how the site should link in with pre-existing content hosted elsewhere. The team visited the National Park last month, heading out to Tomintoul to see the new affordable housing, the local information centre and new Glenlivet bike trails. Further visits are planned over the coming months.

We were audited recently by the website accessibility monitoring team at the UK Government Digital Service, part of the Cabinet Office. Whilst the site performed well overall, they found some accessibility issues. We were given 12 weeks to fix these



issues and, whilst the service were prepared to wait until our new website is live, we decided to make the recommended changes now to ensure an accessible experience for all. Learnings from this process will also be fed into our new website development project.

The [interactive map](#) for the next Local Development Plan is now closed for comments. The Commonplace site has received over 2,000 visitors so far and there were 41 contributions to the map over the initial consultation period. A campaign to promote the consultation had a reach of 53,525, including 1,372 likes / reactions and 885 link clicks and 38 comments.

**23. Branding and publications:** The [fourth issue of Cairn magazine](#) hit doorsteps in the middle of November. In addition to the usual mix of community and conservation news, the magazine featured articles about the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Park, HRH The King's visit to Scalán, breeding success for birds of prey in the National Park, and an interview with the Gordon family to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lonach Highland and Friendly Society. A plain text version of the publication has also been created for screen reader users, in line with advice from our Equalities Advisory Panel.

Working closely with the Cairngorms Business Partnership and local photographer Ed Smith, we have captured a series of 'stock images' for businesses signed up to the brand charter scheme. These images are designed to be used on partner websites, promotional material and social media channels, and are entirely free for charter holders to use.

We are working with various partners on interpretation projects across the National Park. This includes Royal Zoological Society of Scotland on their new wildlife discovery centre at the Highland Wildlife Park, Balmoral Estate on their new virtual lek installation, VisitScotland on new panels for the Ballater iCentre, and Anagach Woods Trust and Castle Roy Trust on new interpretation panels in those two locations.

## Organisational Development

### 24. Business Continuity Planning:

Following consultation with staff, we have now adopted a Hybrid Working policy, whereby the default position is that staff can work 50% of their contractual hours



office based, and 50% home based, with requests for more time home based requiring a process of application, approval and contract review.

Staff are currently working to 36 hour / week contractual terms, with the aim of reducing to 35 hours / week from April 2024. The Best Companies Staff Survey, launched in November will support the review of the phased reduction in contractual working hours. All public sector organisations are expected to be moving to 35 hours/week contractual hours.

**25. Staffing update:** Since September:

a) Staff who left the organisation were:

- i. All Seasonal Rangers ended the season in October. Trainee Rangers ended their season in September.
- ii. Elly Milne, Payroll, Accounts and Finance Officer left for personal reasons
- iii. Jocasta Mann, CCP Comms Officer, left for career development to join another organisation, prior to the end of her fixed term contract
- iv. Kirsty Partridge, Rural Development Officer, left for career development to join another organisation, prior to the end of her fixed term contract

v.

d) External appointments, following a competitive external recruitment process were as follows:

- i. Gavin Hosie joined on a fixed term contract as Cairngorms National 2030 Green Health Link Worker, job sharing with Louise Emslie

e) Internal recruitment:

- i. Calum Guy and Craig Fraser appointed as Payroll, Accounts and Finance Officers

**26. Youth Employment:**

a) **Graduate/Internship/Trainee posts:**

- i. Joyce Aranuwa appointed to short term Climate Change Internship
- ii. We are in the process of recruiting a Content Creation Intern

**27. Equalities:**

- a) Following a recruitment campaign, The Park Authority appointed seven new members to the Equality Advisory Panel. The members joined their first Equalities Advisory Panel meeting in October, where the website contractors delivered an



engaging and informative workshop on the new website, seeking the Equalities Advisory Panel's views on accessibility.

- b) The Park Authority adopted several equalities policies, including the Gender Diversity Policy, Neurodiversity Policy and Reasonable Adjustments Passport Policy. These policies were adopted following extensive consultation with staff, the Equalities Advisory Panel and the internal Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Advocacy Group. The HR Team were invited to speak at a Neurodiversity in the Workplace conference, where the Park Authority was recognised as being a progressive organisation with regards to its approach to equalities.

#### **28. Organisational Development:**

The development of the Organisational Development Strategy is progressing well, with action plans being developed for each of the key themes, covering Infrastructure, Information and Data Management, Staff Skills and Development, Staff Resilience and Wellbeing, Values and Culture, and Communications. The Best Companies Survey results will also feed in to the evolving Organisational Development Strategy, together with feedback from a recent All Staff Gathering.

#### **29. Finance:**

- a) Peatland resource funding of £104k, which was anticipated in the annual budget, but was then subsequently unavailable, has been reinstated.
- b) The rise in interest rates and new opportunities for cash flow management have enabled us to place funds on an interest-bearing deposit account, which is likely to yield earned interest of up to £40k.
- c) Over the past few months, we have experienced pressure on overhead budgets, particularly staff remuneration. However, additional sources of funds are likely to provide sufficient flexibility to allow us to achieve a break-even position at year-end.
- d) Capital expenditure on peatland restoration is expected to underspend on available funding; the remainder of the operational plan is set to deliver to budget expectations.



## **Title: Convener Update**

**Prepared by: Sandy Bremner, Convener**

30. I met with a wide range of stakeholders since my last report, and have represented the Board and chaired a series of meetings to discuss delivery of the National Park Authority's priorities. These have included the following:
31. **Housing:** I have written to Housing Minister Paul McLennan, underlining the critical impacts of affordable housing shortages on the National Park's ability to deliver some of its core functions, requesting a meeting to discuss future options.
32. **NatureScot:** Met with NatureScot's new Chair, Professor Colin Galbraith, and Chief Executive Francesca Osowska, for an introductory discussion on the challenges and significant opportunities ahead. We agreed on the benefits of regular Chairs meetings.
33. **Europarc 2023:** Took part in the international conference on national parks, contributing to discussions including developing legislation for nature restoration, the importance of involving communities in policy development, the pros and cons of species reintroduction, and the need to provide community-sensitive leadership in tackling the crises of biodiversity loss and climate change.
34. **New National Park:** Helped launch the Scottish Government's consultation to designate at least one new National Park, with media engagement including an interview for STV News and coverage by the BBC.
35. **Business:** Chaired a meeting with leaders of the Cairngorms Business Partnership, discussing support for business, housing issues, the proposed Visitor Levy, and other areas of common interest. CBP representatives expressed support for the format and we agreed to continue with regular meetings on a focused agenda.
36. **Scalan:** Attended with the Deputy Convener the formal opening by His Majesty the King of the Scalan Mills conservation project and highlighted the National Park's support for a range of projects delivered as part of the Tomintoul and Glenlivet Landscape Partnership.



37. **Cairngorm Business Partnership:** Took part in the Cairngorms Business Partnership's annual conference in Aviemore, including discussions on a range of challenges to business and community interests, the potential impact and opportunities of a proposed Visitor Levy, and the major impediments to business posed by the acute shortage of affordable housing.
38. **National Parks Partnership:** Participated in the National Parks Partnerships AGM, with a focus on future funding opportunities, private sector finance, and the development of new models for the delivery of investing in nature.
39. **Deer Management/Forestry:** Met with land managers and representatives of NatureScot and Scottish Forestry, at Glen Tanar Estate, to discuss the challenges of deer management, forestry development and related issues, in the context of a mixed-use commercial estate, and how specific challenges might be overcome.
40. **Tourism:** Had a wide-ranging meeting with the Chair and Chief Executive of VisitAberdeenshire, discussing opportunities for further information-sharing, and joint working on the opportunities and challenges facing the sector. We agreed to meet as a group twice annually, in addition to other engagement throughout the year.
41. **Business Policy:** Met with the Chief Executive of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, Dr Liz Cameron, and discussed the options for strategic solutions to achieving business, community and nature-restoration goals, including the need for a bold approach to the provision of affordable housing.
42. **Community Council:** Met the Chair of Nethybridge Community Council and discussed community concerns and opportunities, including the long-term trends in housing availability, and the economic and social impacts on the area.