



## **For information**

**Title: CEO Report and Convener Update**

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

### **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. **Peatland restoration** – 1886 hectares (ha) has been brought under restoration in 2024/25 on 17 projects across the National Park. Further work, still to be accounted for, will bring the total to an estimated 2100ha. This significantly exceeds target and represents a considerable achievement. Currently there are 15 projects under consideration for 2025/26 totalling approximately 1700ha. The programme is currently exceeding targets in the National Park Partnership Plan (NPPP).
2. **Cairngorms Agricultural Advisory Group (CAAG)** – The most recent meeting of the group took place on Monday 24 February where Malcolm Smith was introduced as the new Agricultural Adviser. The group welcomed the opportunities to improve communications with farmers and crofters across the whole National Park and discussed priority areas of work for 2025. Other topics for discussion included the draft fire management plan and results of the floodbank survey. The next meeting will be in June.
3. **Deer management** – Both community larders funded through Cairngorms 20230 (C2030) have been operational since mid-January. By the end of February, they had delivered over 700kg of venison to community kitchens, food banks and schools across Perth and Kinross, Strathspey, Speyside, Aberdeenshire and Angus. The project attracted wide media coverage and will reach a UK audience through BBC Countryfile. 12 estates have qualified for venison subsidy within the West Grampians Deer Management Group (DMG) and we expect to confirm funding by the end of March.
4. **Beaver** – A full time Beaver Assistant has been recruited, supporting delivery of the management and mitigation plan and landowner engagement. The Park Authority, partners, farmers from Strathspey and members of the Beaver Monitoring and Mitigation Group visited Tayside to see and hear from farmers who have been living alongside beavers for many years. The group saw how beavers were



affecting erosion caused by dynamic, modified rivers and where they could be accommodated and managed.

5. **Waders** - With funding and support from the Park Authority, Speyside Waders and Wetland Initiative and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) are running the 2025 Cairngorms Wader Survey. Over 70 volunteers are helping monitor curlew, snipe, lapwing, oystercatcher and redshank on farms in Badenoch, Strathspey, Glenlivet, Tomintoul and parts of Perthshire. 2025 marks 25 years since this five yearly monitoring began.
6. **Flood embankment survey** - A condition assessment of 87km of embankments on the River Spey and selected tributaries, from the Spey Dam to Grantown-on-Spey has identified 84% of embankments in good condition, with breaches in a combined length of 1.1km, and 0.87km at high risk of future erosion. The survey highlights factors that affect the integrity of embankments, where they are at highest risk of breaching, and some of the mitigation measures available. Whilst originally commissioned to underpin commitments in the beaver management and mitigation plan, there are clear opportunities to use this information to support a whole river approach to improving resilience to climate change impacts.
7. **Fire Management** – The Integrated Wildfire Management Plan is currently out for public consultation and the seasonal fire management byelaw has been submitted to Scottish Government for confirmation.

## **Visitor Services and Active Travel**

8. **Paths and long-distance routes** – Speyside Way:
  - a) Directional signage – The works to update the directional signage (fingerposts and waymarkers) between Aviemore and the Park boundary (beyond Cromdale) is mostly complete. The main post installation has been done, and final snagging works are being wrapped up. Key improvements have been the signage through Nethy bridge and Boat of Garten, where metal lamppost signs have been used in place of posts, making this much clearer.
  - b) Gates - Cromdale to Mains of Dalvey at the Park boundary. We have secured a contractor to remove the outdated “rambler” style gates that are so difficult to access, especially on a bike and impossible on a horse. The initial contract is due to commence in mid-April, starting at Cromdale to Mains of Dalvey at the Park boundary. We hope to remove all the rambler gates and replace (only where required) with self-closing pedestrian gates made to the proper specifications to accommodate bikes and horses.



9. **Ranger services** – Seasonal rangers for 2025 have recently been recruited with three full time rangers covering Deeside, two full time in Angus, and five full time and two Part time rangers covering Badenoch and Strathspey. The latter is designed to give extra cover over weekends when this area can see particular pressures. Of the 12 seasonal rangers five are returning from last year and seven are new to the service with most commencing work from 17 March so as to be fully operational by the Easter holidays.
10. **Visitor infrastructure** – Walkers carpark at the Linn of Quoich - With the recent renovation of the nearby Picnic Lodge and the East Quoich footpath (grant assisted by the Visitor Infrastructure Improvement programme 2024/25) National Trust Scotland (NTS) Mar Lodge Estate anticipated congestion at the car park. Planning permission to nearly double the size of the car parking facility (from approximately 16 to 30 cars) has been granted and additional funds have been secured from the Park Authority to complete the works by the end of March 2025.
11. **Volunteering and health walks** – A volunteer recruitment exercise is under way to continue increasing the number of volunteer rangers towards the 2030 target of 200. Appointments will be made in early April with volunteer induction and training planned for later in the month.
12. **Active and sustainable transport** – Following the transfer of the lead role in developing the Dulnain Bridge to Grantown-on-Spey active travel route from the community to the Park Authority a small piece of work has been undertaken by specialist contractors to identify the work still required before statutory permissions can be sought and construction costs identified. Following this an application for funding to complete this work has been made to Transport Scotland's Active Travel Infrastructure Fund.

A number of funding applications had been submitted to Sustrans in early 2024 seeking funding for the Cairngorms 2030 Active Communities work. Budget constraints in financial year 2024/25 meant no awards were made but we were recently informed that the applications for Aviemore North, Boat of Garten, Carrbridge and Nethy Bridge and Newtonmore could be supported by Transport Scotland in 2025/26. Further engagement would be required in Carrbridge before any project was developed further but work to revisit the anticipated costs for other locations has been undertaken in light of the inflationary increases since the original prices were obtained in 2023. A final response from Transport Scotland on what can be funded is expected in April.

Following procurement exercises contracts have been let for behaviour change activities including work directly with schools and to continue the development of



the first three cycle hubs in communities in the Park – Glenmore, Grantown-on-Spey and Ballater.

## **Planning and Rural Development**

- 13. Local Development Plan (LDP)** - Work continues on building the evidence base for the next LDP, with the Development Plan Scheme being approved at the Board meeting in November 2024, ongoing engagement on topic papers, and staff attending public engagement sessions and local events. Consultation has taken place on topic papers covering Heating and Cooling, Sustainable Transport, Waste, Energy and Education (Have Your Say Today - Cairngorms Local Development Plan - Commonplace). Officers have supported Voluntary Action in Badenoch and Strathspey (VABS) to undertake consultation events on the Strathdon, Kingussie and Dulnain Bridge Community Action Plans, and the feedback from these events will inform the new LDP. A 'gamification' event, designed to encourage participation with under-represented groups on priorities for the next LDP, was held in late February. Officers worked with the Cairngorms 2030 team and the University of Edinburgh to create the game. The game play and discussion has been recorded for analysis by the University, and feedback on the day was positive. An updated Delivery Programme, which monitors progress in delivering the current LDP, is also presented to this Board meeting for approval under separate cover.
- 14. Planning casework** – The Planning Committee has met three times since the last formal Board meeting on 22 November 2024. The Committee has approved planning applications for the repair and upgrade of an existing track at Balavil Estate, three houses at the Dalfaber development in Aviemore, and amended proposals for affordable housing provision at the ongoing development at Station Road in Newtonmore. It has also approved an update to the Park Authority's Enforcement Charter and the Authority's response to a UK Government consultation on proposals for reforming the electricity infrastructure consenting processes in Scotland. After calling-in a planning application due to an outstanding flood risk objection from Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), Scottish Ministers granted planning permission for 21 homes at Station Yard, Nethy Bridge in line with the decision that Planning Committee made in August 2023. The Park Authority has recently called-in planning applications for a telecoms mast at Glenavon Estate, Upper Dee River floodplain restoration proposals, an extension and alterations to the Abernethy Trust centre at Nethy Bridge, and 35 homes near Lynstock Park in Nethy Bridge. These applications will be reported to Planning Committee for determination in due course.
- 15. Visitor and resident surveys** - The first tranche of visitor surveys (between May and September 2024) saw a total of 848 people take part face-to-face in over 30 high footfall locations across the National Park, plus an additional 588 online. This



data has been analysed but as we are continuing to gather data over the coming months it will not be published for a few months yet.

The first ever resident and worker survey of the National Park took place over a six-month period between July 2024 and January 2025. Independent market research company M.E.L Research (who have previously worked with the Peak District National Park) were commissioned to deliver both this and the visitor survey, and a total of 1,357 responses were received from every community in the National Park. Results will be published in full on our website over the coming weeks and highlights will appear in the spring edition of *Cairn* magazine. Like the visitor survey, we intend to repeat the exercise every few years to track progress / changes over time.

## Communications and Engagement

16. **Community and stakeholder engagement** – Planning is underway to bring together an event in late April for all local community councils, updating on the work undertaken since the last meeting in March 2024. The gathering will also provide a platform for communities across the National Park to share highlights from their work over the past 12 months and to explore potential collaboration opportunities.

Cairngorms 2030 engagement is ongoing with the schedule for the year ahead currently being developed, taking into account both geographical requirements, learnings from last year (where we engaged nearly 1,000 people) and the needs of all C2030 projects.

17. **Corporate communications** – It has been a busy start to the year, with the team fielding media inquiries and liaising with partners on the illegal releases of lynx and feral pigs. An early PR highlight has been the Cairngorms 2030 [deer larder launch](#), which attracted significant coverage in national newspapers, [digital outlets](#) and on [television](#) and radio bulletins. There is more to come on that front, including features on Landward, Radio 4's Food Programme, and an upcoming Countryfile Cairngorms special which will feature other farming angles as well as a focus on our capercaillie work.

Other key activity over the period includes findings from the River Spey [floodbank survey](#) and the [integrated fire management plan consultation](#). There have also been a range of staff voices in our local newspaper columns, from ranger Pete Short on winter wildlife watching, to Jos Milner on the [importance of aspen](#). Upcoming stories include the results of our resident and worker survey and a focus on Green Health Week in May.



18. **Website and social media** – The website project is coming to the end of its first phase, with a beta site due to go live at the start of April. The beta site will sit alongside our existing website for a period of just over a month to gather user feedback and to stress test the new site, before the old site is switched off early in the summer.

New content is being added daily, and the team are working hard with colleagues across the organisation to create, review, edit and consolidate thousands of pages of content. Further user research has been undertaken with residents and visitors, with a particular focus on accessibility and users with additional needs, ensuring that the site meets and exceeds accessibility standards.

In March we successfully merged our legacy Cairngorms Nature Facebook page with our existing National Park Facebook page, bringing our total audience to 82,000 across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and Bluesky (up from 66,000 pre-merger). Our net growth over the period – over and above account merging – was 5,530.

Between 22 November and 11 March, we received over 4.2 million impressions (up 78% on the previous year), 197,048 engagements (up 181%), 918,542 video views (up 166.9%). It is important to note that these results have been a combination of paid for and organic content, albeit the former was significantly impacted by a Scottish Government budget freeze post-October 2024.

Highlights from the period include the [first of two short films](#) telling the story of the deer larder project (part of Cairngorms 2030), which has almost 100,000 views on Facebook, the platform where we have our highest resident population. Another [short film](#) featured young people involved in Fèis Spè, talking about the importance of Fèis Week in helping them connect to their cultural heritage and to one another. We've also shared content 'day in the life' content with our seasonal rangers from last year, supported advertising for the Cairngorms Trust Park for All grant and shared seasonal nature updates and blogs on everything from beavers to waders to woodlands.

Our community management strategy – responding to as many comments on our posts as possible – continues to reap rewards and has been successful in generating positive comments and interactions, and providing the opportunity to address misinformation; however, there have been significant capacity implications as a result of this.





19. **Branding and publications** – The spring edition of *Cairn* magazine is due to hit doorsteps from 07 April. The lead story in this issue is the deer larder project, alongside a snapshot of our resident and worker survey results, an interview with GrowBiz partner business Cairngorm Vets, and the usual mix of community, nature and Cairngorms 2030 stories.

We are preparing to refresh a number of interpretation panels around the National Park from the start of April when budget allows, while planning is also underway for new projects including the Sky Hide stargazing spot at Tomintoul. Several new publications are also in the works, including leaflets on the Cairngorms 2030 green prescription project, which will be made available in GP surgeries.

Mid-March also brought news from Bòrd na Gàidhlig that our draft third edition of the Park Authority's Gaelic Language Plan had been approved. The finished plan will be published on our website over the coming weeks, with a package of work including printed and online materials, training and partnership working all gearing up from this spring.

## **Organisational Development**

20. **Staffing update** - Since November, the following staff changes took place:
- a) Staff leaving the organisation:
    - i. Ewan Campbell left his role of Peatland Action Project Officer, to move to another organisation.
    - ii. Fi Thomson left the C2030: Community Engagement Coordinator post, for personal reasons.
  - b) Staff joining the organisation:
    - i. Malcolm Smith joined as Agricultural Adviser. This was a variation of the role vacated by Lewis Pate.
    - ii. Lucy Topalian joined as Green Health Link Worker. This is a maternity cover post for Louise Emslie.
    - iii. Jennifer Ross joined as reception and Admin Assistant, replacing Marie Smith. Lacquarn Rose and Lauren Neil joined as Graduate Planners, filling historic vacancies.
    - iv. 10 Seasonal Rangers were appointed, alongside the two existing rangers - the full Seasonal Ranger complement is as follows: Emily Alsford (re-appointed); Rhona Garry (reappointed); Cameron Fox-Clarke, Carol-Ann Glass; Chloe Harkness; Fiona Friel; Jade Lennox; Jayne Brown



(2024 Trainee Ranger); Sarah Stevens (reappointed); Caitlin Fox ; Milly Revill-Hayward; Criag Fraser (reappointed).

- c) Staff appointments following a robust internal recruitment process:
  - i. Tom Fredriksson joined the Peatland Team as Peatland Action Assistant, replacing Joel who moved to the Peatland Action Project Officer post. Previously, Tom was one of the Park Authority's Seasonal Rangers. He joined the Authority in 2022 as a Trainee Ranger and thereafter worked every season as a Seasonal Ranger.
  - ii. Marie Smith was appointed to the C2030 Admin Assistant post, replacing Dot Harris who moved to the Planning Assistant post. Previously Marie was the Reception and Admin Assistant.
  - iii. Pete Short was appointed to The Beaver Assistant role. This is a new role to support the Beaver Project. Previously, Pete was a Countryside Ranger
  - iv. Emily Alsford was appointed to the Countryside Ranger post, backfilling Pete Short. Previously Emily was a Seasonal Ranger
- d) Roles appointed for future start dates:
  - i. Two Peatland Action Project Officers, both starting in June.
  - ii. A Financial Accountant, starting in June, who will replace Danie Ralph who is retiring at the end of April.
- e) Live external recruitment:
  - i. Ecological Advice Officer, replacing Karen Aldridge
  - ii. Peatland Science and Monitoring Officer - new post
  - iii. Community Engagement Coordinator - to replace Fi Thomson-

## **21. Youth employment -**

- a) Beth Ogilvy joined the Park Authority on a short-term Internship as Access and Infrastructure GIS Intern. The Park Authority then recruited a new role of GIS Officer - Peatland Action. Beth applied for the role and was successfully appointed to this core post. It's really positive that we can take on an intern and grown them such that they are able to apply for and be appointed to core roles.
- b) We recently attended Alford Academy Careers Fair, which was run in conjunction with Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) North East. This was an opportunity to meet both young people and parents and chat about the various careers available in the Park Authority and the pathways into





them. This is always a well-supported event both by employers and those attending.

- c) We also attended Grantown Grammar Subject Choices Fair, which was run in conjunction with DYW Inverness and Highlands. The event gave young people at the school an opportunity to speak and ask questions to members of the Park Authority, other local business, and further education providers about potential career paths they may be interested in. The event was designed to help young people at the school make an informed decision about which subjects to choose. The event was well attended, and we spoke to many young people throughout the morning

- 22. **Equalities** – We recently hosted a staff engagement session to celebrate LGBTQ+ History month. We are also in the process of developing a staff-led peer support group for neurodiverse staff. This will complement the existing Menopause support Group; the Carer's Support Group and the support group for staff who are immune suppressed. We have also recently been a guest speaker at the Holyrood Insights Menopause in the Office Conference
- 23. **Organisational Development** - The newly adopted organisational principles are becoming well embedded and are being used by staff in a variety of contexts, including the setting of job plans and the performance development conversations; they are part of the probation evaluation process; and are informing performance management processes. We are also exploring how we can enhance engagement with staff in bands D and E, and are developing an action plan which will feed into the Organisational Development Strategy.

## **Procurement**

- 24. Since August, when our new Procurement Officer, Mikko Saari, joined the Park Authority, the ongoing improvement of processes and controls has progressed well. Progress against the agreed plan has been shared with the Audit and Risk Committee, both at meetings of the Committee and with the Chair and Vice Chair in the period between meetings.
- 25. Mikko has guided the C2030 project teams through 23 individual procurements, 13 of which are now complete. We are benefiting from shared service arrangements with Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority and Scotland Excel, from whom we receive advice and practical support.
- 26. The procurement pipeline for the Cairngorms 2030 project currently comprises 80 projects with a total value of £23 million. Of these, 30 projects are procurements of



a more complex nature that will be carried out using the Scottish Government's procurement routes two and three.

**Grant Moir**

**13 March 2025**

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**Title: Convener's update**

**Prepared by: Sandy Bremner, Board Convener**

## **Purpose**

To highlight to board members and Senior Management Team (SMT) and staff of the meetings and events the Board Convener has been attending since the last Formal Board meeting.

1. **Strathdon** – Chaired a new group of Board members and senior staff, working to help the Strathdon community, which is facing multiple challenges, and agreed follow-up actions. This initiative was launched following a request by a Board member.
2. **Nethy Bridge** – Following an approach from the Chair of Nethy Bridge Community Council, worked with the Park Authority staff to address a long-standing issue facing people in the area.
3. **Business** – Attended the Cairngorms Business Partnership annual conference in Aviemore, engaging with business owners on a range of issues, from support opportunities to the development and use of Cairngorms National Park branding.
4. **Tourism** - Attended the North East Tourism Conference at P&J Live, Aberdeen, meeting a range of tourism and related business representatives.
5. **Visit Aberdeenshire** – Meeting with the tourism organisation's Chief Executive, discussing challenges in the sector and potential implications of a visitor levy.
6. **UK National Parks** – Attended National Parks UK's Chairs and CEOs meeting. Highlighted the need to engage effectively across communities and other stakeholder groups on all the issues we face.
7. **Ballater** – Met representatives of Ballater and Crathie Community Council to discuss progress in ramping up responses to community concerns about flood and drought risks.
8. **Spey Floodbanks** – Attended meeting at Boat of Garten with landowners and managers to discuss survey results of the condition of River Spey floodbanks and met individual attendees to discuss related issues.



9. **Culture** – Attended civic reception marking the thirtieth anniversary of the Elphinstone Institute, promoting Scots language and culture, engaging with a range of stakeholders on the National Park's work on cultural heritage.
10. **Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT)** – Met the Chief Executive Officer of the GWCT, discussing potential for the spread of Environmental Farmer Groups, collaborating to deliver nature restoration and develop nature capital markets.
11. **Scottish Government** – Met Scottish Government officials, discussing some of the wide range of projects being delivered across the National Park.
12. **Dee Catchment Partnership (DCP)** – Met the Chair of the DCP, discussing the organisation's developing role in the Park Authority - convened Dee Resilience Group and plans to scale up project work.
13. **Flooding** – Addressed ceremony to mark the opening of the River Dee salmon fishing season, reiterating the Park Authority's commitment to help deliver landscape-scale projects to mitigate against floods and droughts.
14. **Beavers** – Attended tour of beaver sites in the Tay catchment, organised by the Park Authority in conjunction with the Cairngorms Beaver Monitoring and Mitigation Group. Briefed on significant problems faced by local groups in securing mitigation actions in their area, and underlined the National Park's commitment to work closely with land managers and act swiftly to help address issues in the Cairngorms.
15. **Media** – Produced columns on the Park Authority work for regional newspapers and contributed to a series of national newspapers and websites on project announcements.
16. **BBC** – Met with award-winning Attenborough film maker Alistair Forthergill, connecting him with the Park Authority staff on plans for a major new BBC wildlife series focused on Scotland.
17. **Dee** – Attended meetings of the River Dee Resilience Strategy Group, convened by the Park Authority, supporting efforts to step up delivery of mitigations against flood risks to homes, business and biodiversity.
18. **Dementia** – Attended Cairngorms 2030 - funded Outdoor Dementia Resource Centre presentation for people living with dementia and their carers and met families planning to make use of the opportunities at the Badaguish centre.



19. **Academic** – Presented seminar at the University of Aberdeen's Department of Politics and International Relations on the Politics of Conservation, focusing on efforts to deliver the goal of nature and people thriving together.
20. **Park Authority Liaison** – Attended weekly liaison meetings with the Park Authority Deputy Convener, CEO and Deputy CEO.
21. **National Park Conveners** – Met regularly with Convener of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park to discuss issues of mutual interest.
22. All meetings were in addition to individual meetings and discussions with Board members on a wide range of subjects.

**Sandy Bremner,**

**12 March 2025**

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