For discussion

Title: Annual update on Active Cairngorms Action Plan

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Purpose

The Active Cairngorms Action Plan is one of a series of plans that sit below the National Park Partnership Plan (NPPP). Along with the Sustainable Tourism and Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Plans, these plans collectively describe the Park Authority and partners' work in relation to tourism, visitor facilities and services and the management of visitor impacts on the Park. This report gives Board members oversight of progress towards the plan's objectives and is being presented to the Board in autumn so as to give a timely overview of visitor related activity that took place over the preceding summer season. It also incorporates a review of activity undertaken in relation to the first year of the Cairngorms Fire Management Byelaw.

Recommendations

The Board is asked to:

a) Note the progress towards delivery of the objectives contained within the Active Cairngorms Action Plan.
b) Note the report on the visitor focussed activities of the Park Authority and partner ranger services during the 2026 summer season.
c) Note the details of activities undertaken in relation to the first year of the Cairngorms Fire Management Byelaw

Strategic context

1. The Active Cairngorms Action Plan describes in more detail specific activities that will be undertaken by the Park Authority to support the delivery of the NPPP

objectives. In particular this plan describes key activities that will be undertaken by the Park Authority to achieve the following Park Plan objectives:

a) Nature
   i. A7: Fire Management
   ii. A13: Species Recovery
b) People
   i. B9. Mental and physical health
   ii. B10. A Park for All
   iii. B11. Volunteering and outdoor learning
c) Place
   i. C5. Visitors to the National Park
   ii. C8. Accessible path and cycle network
   iii. C9. High-quality visitor experience

Strategic policy consideration

2. This report describes past activity and as such does not require the Board to make any policy decisions. However, the report does include the first data on the Park Authority's activity around the implementation of the fire management byelaw, the introduction of which was a key strategic policy decision taken by the Board.

Strategic risk management

3. The activity described in this report assists in mitigating strategic risk no. 11 – "Reputational damage may result from: Unrealistic expectations of what the Park Authority and its partners can achieve…". Corporate risk 11 specifically refers to fire and this is an area where there are high expectations of what the Park Authority can do, notably in relation to wildfire. This report provides details on one of the main areas of activity related to this – the fire management byelaw.

4. Other actions within the Active Cairngorms Action Plan were agreed with likely resource implications and availability considered and in broad terms the amount of activity being delivered are not anticipated to differ significantly from levels of public expectation.

Implications

5. There are no strategic resource implications arising from this report as it describes past activity. However, the continuation of those activities and delivery of many of the targets in the lifespan of the Active Cairngorms Action Plan (2024-2028) continues to have resource implications. These are considered as part of the annual budget setting process.

6. The introduction the fire byelaw required some additional activity around the time of implementation most notably in relation to communications activity and signage as described in paragraphs 15 and 16 below. Continuation of this activity will require additional financial and staff resources in advance of future summer seasons, and this requires to be provided for in the operational budget.

Success measures

7. The NPPP and Active Cairngorms Action Plan both contain a number of targets and measures and this report, and its appendices detail the progress towards achieving these.

8. In introducing the fire byelaw, the Park Authority's core ambition was to reduce the number of "recreational" fires and barbecues which in turn would be expected to reduce the level of risk of wildfires being caused by such fires or barbecues. In terms of measuring the success of the byelaw, reporting therefore focusses primarily on data on the number of fires or barbecues rather than on enforcement data. This approach also reflects the fact that it is the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service that ultimately decides whether cases are taken to court and where cases are taken there may be a significant time gap between the time of the alleged contravention and any case being decided.

Active Cairngorms Action Plan Progress

9. Annex 1 provides an update on progress towards each of the objectives included within the plan. Following the structure of the plan itself, these updates are separated into sections reflecting the seven priority areas for action:
    a) Managing for visitors
    b) Minimising impacts on sensitive species and habitats
    c) Ranger services

d) Public health in the outdoors
e) Volunteer Cairngorms
f) Youth and outdoor learning
g) Paths, trails and outdoor access duties

End of season visitor report

10. As part of delivering the first priority area of Active Cairngorms, the Park Authority undertake a range of visitor management activities including work on outdoor access and tourism infrastructure investment which are the subject of other reports to the Board. However, the highest profile activities which also involve direct engagement with our visitors are the countryside ranger patrols. Through the Park Authority ranger service and partner ranger services that make up a wider "family of ranger services", patrols are undertaken across the Park during the summer months with comprehensive data collected on their engagement activity and the issues they identify and / or address. A summary of this activity is presented here.

11. During 2026, the Park Authority employed six permanent rangers - three based in Badenoch and Strathspey and two based in Deeside as in previous years but with an additional permanent ranger based in Angus and also covering North Perthshire. During summer 2026 a further 15 seasonal rangers were employed, primarily between early April and mid-October as well as four trainee rangers from June to September. In order to support the introduction of the new fire byelaw, employment and shift patterns were modified to give additional staff cover over weekends when evidence from previous years showed most issues arose.

12. During the summer season, 1472 patrols were undertaken by the Park Authority- an increase of 22% compared with 2025. This was partly due to the employment of additional weekend rangers but also reflected an increased focus on patrols in view of the new byelaw rather than other ranger activities. Further data on Park Authority ranger patrols which is also gathered as part of a Scotland-wide data gathering exercise is included in table 1 below.

	Patrols	Engagements	Negative Engagements	Tents	Overnight Camper-vans	Dogs on a lead	Dogs off lead	Live Fires/ BBQs	Old Fires/ BBQs	Bags litter
2026	1472	10978	25	735	176	1729	150	36	279	1060
2025	1100	5983	30	1144	755*	1457	156	109	475	1076

Table1: Cairngorms National Park Authority Ranger Service Patrol Data

* 2025 figures included day parking but from 2026 cover overnight parking only

13. In addition to the direct employment of rangers, the Park Authority also supported 14 ranger services with activities such as training to assist in the consistency of ranger provision and messaging. In 2026 this included specific training sessions and communications support related to the introduction of the new fire byelaw. Across the full family of ranger services around 50 rangers were employed during summer 2025 although numbers at any one-time varied due differing recruitment and employment patterns. Five partners who operate in some of the most highly pressured areas of the Park continued to receive financial support towards their ranger services – Atholl Estate, Rothiemurchus Estate, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Abernethy, Balmoral Estate and Glen Tanar Charitable Trust.

14. Those partners also gather patrol data using a similar framework but as not all partners undertake or record individual patrols in the same way, so the partner ranger data included in table 2 excludes the number of patrols.

	Engagements	Negative engagements	Tents	Camper vans	Dogs on a lead	Dogs off lead	Live Fires/ BBQs	Old Fires/ BBQs	Bags litter
2026	16153	55	1593	5494	3508	1213	66	132	314
2025*	23139	95	3254	3928	4530	1342	213	360	578

Table 2: Partner Ranger Services ranger data

* As some partners have yet to supply final period figures the 2026 data is incomplete.

15. While many locations within the Park will have seen normal patterns of activity it should be noted that the Abernethy – Glenmore fire also had a notable impact on

both visitor and ranger activity from mid-July 2026. For a period of around a month a cordon was in place which restricted access to Glenmore which is typically the busiest visitor destination in the Park. This period also saw partner staff most notably from RSPB and Forestry and Land Scotland involved in firefighting or related activity rather than normal ranger patrols affecting their figures. Park Authority rangers continued patrolling at the expected level during this period but with amended patrol routes. This allowed backfilling in locations such as Loch Garten which were still accessible, but where RSPB rangers were not available as well as carrying out patrols in areas where it was anticipated visitors may visit as an alternative to the restricted area.

Fire Management Byelaw activity

16. In the run up to the introduction of the fire byelaw and during the byelaw period a full programme of communications activity was undertaken. The paid for digital campaign complemented our organic social media strategy. In total this campaign reached 2.1 million people, with 9.6 million impressions. This means that the 2.1 million people saw the campaign multiple times, ensuring the repeated exposure that is necessary for information to be absorbed. 1.3 million people watched the campaign video, featuring residents from across the National Park, including a young person and a Park Authority ranger, and 19,600 people clicked through for more information.

17. To complement the communications activity through other channels a comprehensive signage project was undertaken. This included 12 electronic variable message signs on key road routes into the Park as well as on the approaches to popular locations such as Glenmore and Linn of Dee. These road signs were complemented by a range of site-based signs using a standard design and consistent messaging. More than 400 signs were up across the National Park. Thanks are also due to partners and land managers for making this possible, as more than 100 local businesses got involved and helped to spread the word with everything from leaflets and posters to beer mats and bumper stickers.

18. The Park Authority's ranger team activity on the ground as well as many partner activities reflected the requirements of the new byelaw and to prepare for this several advice and training sessions were held including:
    a) All staff briefing for Park Authority staff.

b) Multiple staff and partner training sessions for countryside rangers – including sessions presented by Police Scotland and Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.
c) Briefing session for volunteer rangers.
d) Presentation to Aviemore and Glenmore Community Council.
e) Presentation to businesses and residents at the Glenmore Gathering.
f) Cairngorms Business Partnership business presentation.
g) Six individual sessions with landowners that manage known visitor hotspots.
h) Joint session with Scottish Land and Estates for non-ranger estate staff.
i) Incorporating fire messaging in Scottish Outdoor Access Code activity in schools.

19. Once the season was under way most activity was delivered through ranger patrols with an increased number of patrols, particularly to well-known hotspots were undertaken during the season. Patrol patterns and indeed recruitment were designed to give a greater presence at weekends when previous experience showed issues were most likely to arise. A summary of key data around patrols and fires and barbecues found are included in the infographic in Annex 2.

20. Recognising that the core ambition was to reduce the number of "recreational" fires and barbecues which in turn would be expected to reduce the level of risk of wildfires enforcement action was not taken when people willingly complied with ranger requests to extinguish a fire or barbecue. The data presented here therefore focusses primarily on the measures related to levels of activity and behaviours observed rather than enforcement. However, there were two instances where it was deemed appropriate to enforce the byelaw and details were gathered and passed to the Procurator Fiscal. At this time, it is not yet clear what action the Procurator Fiscal may take in relation to those cases.

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