



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Mairi Gougeon MSP  
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands  
Scottish Government

**31 January 2025**

Dear Mairi

### **PE2089: Stop More National Parks in Scotland**

*Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to:*

- *Suspend any action to create further National Parks in Scotland.*
- *Instruct an independent review on the operation of the current National Parks, including assessment of the economic impacts on businesses & industries within the two parks including, but not exclusive to, farming, forestry, crofting and angling.*
- *Conduct a consultation with representatives of rural businesses & Community Councils in order to help to frame the remit of said independent review.*

This petition was lodged by Deborah Carmichael on behalf of Lochaber National Park - NO more group in March 2024 and has been considered by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee over a number of meetings.

The Scottish Government committed to designating a new National Park by Spring 2026, stating that National Parks should be designated 'only in response to local community demand.'

The Petitioner raised concerns about the effectiveness of existing National Parks and the initial consultation process to identify a location for the proposed new National Park.

Members are grateful to Lochaber National Park – NO more group for their engagement with the Committee and the valuable information provided through written and oral evidence.

The Committee has considered written evidence from you, the Petitioner and the Scottish Campaign for National Parks and heard evidence from four panels. All written submissions and Official Reports from the Committee's consideration of this petition can be found on the [petition webpage](#).

The Committee would like to thank you and your officials for providing evidence to us on [27 November 2024](#).

Contact: Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP.

Email [petitions.committee@parliament.scot](mailto:petitions.committee@parliament.scot). We welcome calls through Relay UK and in BSL through Contact Scotland BSL.

## The impact of National Parks

The Committee has heard different views on how National Parks impact communities and rural livelihoods.

The Committee understands that National Parks are centrally funded by the Scottish Government through a grant in aid. Your evidence to the Committee highlighted that when National Parks bring many organisations together on specific projects, they have been able to lever additional funding that might not have been available otherwise. In relation to farming, you noted that there is some funding available to farms within a National Park that is not available elsewhere. We heard from witnesses that National Parks can generate tourism-based employment, resulting in improvements to local economies. During evidence to the Committee, you outlined a handful of distinct, funded projects run by National Parks with the aim of bringing improvements to local communities on issues such as health, wellbeing, sustainable connectivity and town centre regeneration.

Some witnesses recognised these benefits and pointed to the obligation on National Park Authorities to create a National Park Partnership Plan to set out their aims and support work with other public bodies. The Committee heard that a key role of National Parks is to bring people together to work towards the aims in these Partnership Plans.

Those in favour of a new National Park also argued that any negative impact of a new National Park would be minimal because those who do not wish to engage with Partnership Plans can operate outside of its aims. Witnesses also explained to the Committee that in National Parks, many of the existing frameworks in relation to land use and farming regulation remain the same as those operating outside of a National Park area. However, the Committee is of the view that this raises questions of efficacy and is keen to better understand the impact of National Parks beyond the secure funding stream provided to them by the Scottish Government.

The Committee has been made aware that National Park structures do not always bring people together in practice. We were concerned to learn that in the Cairngorms National Park, farmers and crofters felt that they had to create their own board to be listened to by the Cairngorms National Park Authority. The Committee is similarly concerned by evidence which suggests that National Parks are not getting the basics right, particularly with regards to public facilities.

Based on their understanding of existing National Parks, communities raised a number of concerns about what a National Park in their area could mean in practice, including:

- over tourism and a lack of infrastructure to support increased visitor numbers
- increased pollution as a result of increased car traffic
- increased house prices
- top-down and bureaucratic processes for farmers and crofters
- pressure on healthcare facilities

The Committee is aware that, while there are some existing reporting mechanisms, National Parks have been in operation in Scotland since 2002 without a full

performance review. A 2008 review of National Parks was started but the second part of this review, intended to consider performance, did not conclude.

During its evidence gathering, the Committee struggled to identify clear evidence to demonstrate the impact of National Parks and has been surprised by the lack of robust evidence to support the Scottish Government's commitment to create a new National Park. The Committee therefore considers that after 22 years of operation, an independent review should be established to assess the performance of existing National Parks before a new park is created. Such a review would not only ensure a robust evidence base for Government policy on National Parks but also provide a good foundation for public discussion and consultation on potential new National Parks or changes to how National Parks operate.

During evidence to the Committee, you expressed the view that an independent review of existing National Parks is not required, pointing to the initial consultation work to identify a location for the proposed new National Park and the forthcoming, full consultation on the proposed Galloway national park. However, the Committee heard a range of concerns regarding the consultation process.

## **Consultation process**

A significant concern raised by the Petitioner and during oral evidence was the quality of the initial consultation with local communities. Oral evidence to the Committee highlighted a lack of clarity and a sense of mistrust in the process.

Evidence from NatureScot explained that its consultation was designed to be open and to produce bottom-up feedback from local people, rather than providing set National Park proposals for people to consider.

However, the Committee heard from those opposed to a new National Park that the consultation was confusing, leaving local people unclear about what a National Park would look like in practice. We understand that local people felt unable to arrive at informed views on the proposed designation. The Committee considers that the intention to introduce a Natural Environment Bill with provisions to modernise the way in which National Parks are managed has added to this uncertainty. Witnesses questioned the decision to consult local communities on the creation of a new National Park when the underpinning legislation is going to change, suggesting that this has made it more challenging to communicate how a new National Park would operate.

We believe it is essential that local communities understand what they are being consulted on to ensure they can provide meaningful feedback to the Scottish Government on its proposals. While we understand the rationale behind the decision to have an open, bottom-up feedback approach, the lack of clear options combined with a lack of clear and robust evidence about the impact of National Parks resulted in local people feeling unable to meaningfully contribute to the consultation.

Consulting local people on whether they want a National Park and seeking feedback on the details of a new National Park in a single consultation has caused further confusion and raised concerns that local people would not be listened to because the decision to create a National Park had already been made. During your evidence

to the Committee, you emphasised that no decision has been made, that the Scottish Government is under no obligation to proceed with a designation and that it will listen to what people have to say through the consultation before proceeding.

In December 2024, [Dumfries and Galloway Council voted](#) 24 to 13 in favour of calling on the Scottish Government to hold and finance a local referendum local for people to have their say on whether a new National Park should be created in Galloway. In light of this clear expression of support from Dumfries and Galloway Council, the Committee is keen to understand whether you will reconsider the proposal to hold a local referendum on this issue to understand the level of support for a new National Park.

Some witnesses expressed concern about whether NatureScot can act independently given its relationship to the Scottish Government and its support for new National Parks. This erosion of trust in NatureScot further supports an independent review being carried out. Issues with the dissemination of information about the consultation via leaflets were raised by campaign groups and acknowledged by NatureScot as an area to improve upon for the full consultation.

[During evidence to the Committee, Pete Rawcliffe from NatureScot stated](#) that they were trying to make the forthcoming formal consultation as accessible as possible to a range of different communities across the area. However, the Committee remains concerned that an inability to clearly communicate the impact of National Parks and the initial consultation have exacerbated division in local communities and eroded trust in the process.

The [Official Report](#) from the Committee's most recent consideration of this petition has been published.

The Committee would be grateful to receive your response electronically, in Word format, by no later than **28 February 2025**. Your response will be processed in accordance with the Parliament's policy on the treatment of written evidence.

On behalf of the Committee, thank you for your assistance.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Carlaw', written in a cursive style.

**Jackson Carlaw MSP**  
**Convener**