

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

## **Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands written submission 4 March 2025**

Thank you for your letter of 31 January 2025 regarding the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee's further consideration of petition PE2089: Stop More National Parks in Scotland.

### **The impact of National Parks**

As you have mentioned in your letter, I gave evidence to the Committee on 27 November 2024 which included information about the role, impact and benefits of Scotland's National Parks. In your letter you have indicated that the Committee is keen to better understand the impact of National Parks beyond the secure funding stream provided to them by the Scottish Government. Attached at Annex A is some detailed information about the wider impacts of National Parks. This is based on information provided by the two Scottish Park authorities, and I hope the Committee will find it helpful.

### **Independent Review**

As I have made clear in my previous correspondence to the Committee, there are no current plans for the Scottish Government to conduct an independent review of the two existing National Parks in Scotland. That is because National Parks are accountable to their boards and to the Scottish Government. The Scottish Parliament can also scrutinise the Parks' performance directly.

Delivery is monitored and reviewed at regular meetings between the Scottish Government and National Park authority Convenors and Chief Executives. Park authorities are also required to report on their delivery and performance through their Annual Report and Accounts which are laid before Parliament and published.

### **Consultation process**

In your letter you have raised the public consultation on the proposal to establish a new National Park. You have reflected on evidence that was presented to the Committee by a number of witnesses and you have highlighted the Committee's concerns that local people may have felt unable to meaningfully contribute to the consultation.

I hope that the Committee will find it helpful to receive an update on the consultation process, and the work undertaken by NatureScot, which has aimed to make the consultation as open and accessible as possible and to ensure that people living and working in the area have been given the opportunity to discuss the issues, consider the content of the proposal and make their views known.

Following an initial pre-consultation period, NatureScot launched the formal public consultation on 7 November 2024. The consultation period was extended by two weeks to take account of the festive period and it closed on 14 February 2025.

Over 1,000 people attended over 30 public consultation events, online sessions and drop in surgeries. The public consultation events were independently facilitated by an external organisation that has expertise in hosting and running public engagement events. Everyone attending the consultation events has been supported to share their ideas and opinions in a welcoming environment. The additional drop-in sessions hosted by NatureScot have enabled local residents to ask questions and discuss specific topics before completing the consultation survey.

Two versions of the consultation survey were made available on NatureScot's website and its dedicated online information hub. A summary version was designed for individuals and households. A longer, more technical version was designed for organisations and stakeholder groups. Respondents were asked to complete one survey and they could choose whether to complete the summary version or the longer version.

The online information hub provided information to the public about National Parks and the consultation process.

Paper copies of the survey were distributed to 52,000 households and businesses within the proposed area. Additional copies were made available to households on request. Print, audio and Gaelic versions were also made available on request.

Over 5000 consultation surveys have been completed and feedback from the consultation events and meetings has been reported on and returned to NatureScot in order to help shape their advice. NatureScot will analyse every consultation response and they will report to the Scottish Government on all views expressed during the consultation.

The consultation survey provided people with background information about the role and purpose of National Parks. It asked people whether they support or oppose the idea of new National Park being established in the area. It also asked them for their views on the possible area, powers, functions and governance of a new National Park, or any alternative suggestions that they wished to put forward.

The NatureScot reporter team has also held meetings with a wide range of local representatives, stakeholder organisations and interested parties. These include community councils, local authorities, business organisations, land managers, public bodies and third sector organisations including those representing people with protected characteristics. Input from these meetings has helped shape the options to be formally and publicly consulted on from November onwards e.g. the geographical area, functions and board membership of the proposed park.

In your letter you have noted that Dumfries and Galloway Council recently voted in favour of a motion calling on the Scottish Government to hold and finance a local referendum on whether or not a new National Park should be established in Galloway. You have added that the Committee is keen to understand the

Government's views on this motion and the level of support required for a new National Park.

As I explained when I gave evidence to the Committee, the public consultation that NatureScot has carried out asked local people whether or not they want a National Park within their area. It also asked for views on the more detailed aspects of the proposal such as the possible area, powers, functions and governance of the proposed National Park. We think it is very important for people to have their say on these issues too and it would not be possible to obtain this type of detail through a referendum.

NatureScot has now begun the process of analysing all of the consultation responses. In the Spring they will report to the Scottish Government on the findings of the consultation and the views of people that live and work in the proposed area will be clearly reported. The Scottish Government will carefully consider the outcome of the consultation before taking any further decisions.

### **Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill**

The Committee has raised concerns about consulting local communities on the creation of a new National Park whilst simultaneously making changes to the National Parks legislation.

You will be aware that the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill was introduced to Parliament on 19 February 2025: [Natural Environment \(Scotland\) Bill | Scottish Parliament Website](#). The Bill amends the National Parks (Scotland) Act in order to:

- modernise the language of the National Park aims and elaborate on what is considered to be part of the aims;
- strengthen the existing duties on public sector bodies operating within National Parks so that these bodies must (i) have regard to the National Park aims and (ii) facilitate the implementation of National Park Plans; and
- introduce new powers for Scottish Ministers to be able to set up a fixed penalty notice regime for the contravention of specified National Park byelaws.

The Bill also amends the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 to enable any future National Park to become the access authority for its area, should it be considered appropriate.

The existing powers to designate a new National Park under the 2000 Act and the designation process are not affected by the Bill. The proposed changes update the language of the aims, with the new subsection elaborating on what is considered to be part of these aims, reflecting the day to day work of National Parks and the existing duties on National Park authorities. Therefore we do not envisage any issues with the Bill being considered by Parliament at this time.

Residents and businesses operating within the existing National Parks and the area proposed for a new National Park now have the opportunity to comment on the proposed changes to the National Parks legislation. We will listen very carefully to any views that they express and we will continue to engage closely with all interested parties. If a designation order were presented to Parliament, there would then be a period of parliamentary scrutiny where individuals, stakeholders and organisations could ask questions and make representations to relevant Members of the Scottish Parliament.

### **Role of NatureScot as reporter**

Finally, I would like to respond to the Committee's concerns and provide reassurance that NatureScot's role as the statutory reporter is being carried out with integrity and professionalism.

The reporter's role and who can take on the role of reporter is set out in the National Parks legislation, with NatureScot specifically named due to its expertise related to the National Park aims. NatureScot undertook the reporting role when Scotland's first two National Parks were established in Loch Lomond & the Trossachs and Cairngorms. NatureScot was once again asked to take on the reporter role for the proposal to designate a new National Park in the south west of Scotland.

The reporter team has completed a very thorough and comprehensive consultation process and they are now starting to analyse the responses. NatureScot has also commissioned an independent review of the consultation process and this will be presented to the Scottish Government alongside the consultation findings and the report on the proposal.

We have been clear within our published [requirement](#) that NatureScot must record, document and take into account the views expressed by all consultees when preparing their report to Ministers. We have also asked NatureScot to ensure that any views which are those of NatureScot as statutory adviser on natural heritage matters are kept clear and distinct.

I hope that I have addressed each of the issues raised in your letter and that the Committee finds this further information helpful.

Yours sincerely,

**MAIRI GOUGEON**