

Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform

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Room T3.40
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Dear John

Thank you for your letter of 29 April on behalf of the Public Petitions Committee seeking views from the Scottish Government on petition PE1556 brought by John Mayhew on behalf of the Scottish Campaign for National Parks (SCNP) and the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland (APRS). I am sorry for the delay in responding.

What is the Scottish Government's view on what the petition seeks?

Scotland's existing national parks have been a great success and Ministers remain committed to work with communities to explore the creation of new national parks.

Scottish Ministers have met with SCNP and APRS on a number of occasions to discuss their proposals. Their most recent meeting was held on 19 May 2015 and the government remains in open dialogue with these organisations as they develop their proposals and we consider the implications of any new designation.

A key consideration for the government in this process is around cost. Substantial cuts to the Scottish Government's budget mean that Ministers must consider how any new designation may impact on our ability to support existing parks where resources have been focused to ensure that they continue to deliver a first class visitor experience and to fulfil the aims set out in the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 as agreed by the Scottish Parliament and as captured in the National Parks' Partnership Plans.

We are aware that SCNP are in the process of preparing additional discussion papers which will provide further detail of their proposals, including on governance models, and the Scottish Government will of course be happy to consider these further papers in due course.

Why has a National Parks Strategy Group not been created in line with the recommendations from the National Parks Strategic Review Recommendations: Consultation Report (2009)?

Ministers concluded in early 2010 that, in view of the prevailing economic climate, that the government was not in a position to set up such a Group. This position has not changed.

What assessment has been made of the financial and other future sustainability of Scotland's existing national parks authorities?

Our National Park Authorities (Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park Authority and Cairngorms National Park Authority) like all other Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) in Scotland, are required to operate within a framework of accountability to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament.

As part of established arrangements for the relationship between the Scottish Government and public bodies such as the National Park Authorities, we assess their financial and operational performance against key targets and objectives which are set out in approved corporate and business plans. There is also a statutory requirement to publish Annual Reports and Accounts, which are the main mechanism by which public bodies inform the Scottish Parliament and the wider public about their performance against corporate and financial objectives. In addition, the Public Services (Scotland) Act 2010 requires Scottish public bodies to publish a statement at the end of each financial year setting out the steps taken during the course of that year to promote and increase sustainable growth, and improve efficiency, effectiveness and economy.

The 2008 Review of our National Parks and the subsequent Scottish Government Simplification Programme which commenced in 2009, which sought to reduce the number of Scottish public bodies by 25%, confirmed a continuing role for our national parks, albeit with a number of modest changes to governance arrangements, including greater use of shared services and smaller Boards.

Both of our National Park Authorities continue to make a hugely valuable contribution to tourism, conservation, rural development and the wider Scottish economy. They play a vital role in delivering Scottish Government outcomes and objectives at both national and local levels. Of course, their operating environment is not without challenges, not least the continuing pressure on public finances. While Scottish Ministers have protected, as far as possible, funding for our existing national parks and provided significant additional capital investment over recent years, difficult choices remain in delivering the wide range of projects and objectives that they aspire to achieve.

Sustainable development in and around our national parks remains a key issue. While the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 makes clear that conservation should be given greater weight over other aims, it is vital to the continued success of Scotland's national park model, to the social and economic development of local communities, and to their contribution to the wider Scottish economy that our national parks continue to strike an appropriate balance between conservation and development as per the intentions in the Act. The Scottish Government believes that both of our national parks are well placed to continue to deliver on this challenge.

Other issues

We note that the evidence provided to the Petitions Committee by SCNP /APRS on 28 April touched on a number of other issues, on which the Committee may find further clarification helpful:

Harris: The local authority, the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, collected information from a wide range of sources and considered the case for a national park in Harris. A report (Oct 2010) by the Council's Director of Development noted:

- It was difficult to make direct comparisons between Harris and the mainland National Parks given the proximity of the latter to large populations;
- The special properties of Harris landscape and environment were already recognised by national and international designations (National Scenic Area, SPA & SAC);
- There could be economic advantages but it was unclear whether these would extend beyond tourism and additional public sector jobs; also unclear whether any advantage would be outweighed by the constraint that development might impose on other forms of development;
- Significant concerns in regard to any new planning structure for Harris given the small number of applications and its small geographic area; the preference was to keep the integrity of the "whole of the Hebrides" approach to planning policy;
- The merit of establishing a new authority for a relatively small geographic area was questionable, and may be contrary to the potential for a "single public authority" for the Outer Hebrides.

The Council advised Scottish Ministers that a convincing case had not been identified for the creation of a national park in Harris.

Models for National Parks – Governance: SCNP have suggested that a new National Park could adopt a governance model involving a board that was a sub-committee of a local authority. However, the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 is specific on matters of governance and would require a Board comprising 3 categories of member balancing local and national interests. The SCNP proposal would therefore not meet the requirements set out by the Scottish Parliament in the founding legislation. During the passage of the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000, the Scottish Parliament was concerned about the need for National Park Authorities to be responsive to local concerns and issues as well as being nationally accountable. As noted previously, the Scottish Government is aware that SCNP are currently giving further consideration to governance issues and will be happy to consider further papers in due course.

Kind regards

AILEEN MCLEOD