**National Park Commission** **SAG 5-1 – Centring views of Young People and People with Disabilities on National Parks**

**Purpose**

1 This discussion paper sets out the results of bespoke engagements undertaken by Young Scot and Disability Equality Scotland (DES) with young people and disabled people to collect their views on the future of National Parks in Scotland. SAG is asked to note and comment on the findings.

**Context**

2 Current research has demonstrated high levels of ecological anxiety among young people (16-25 year olds) ([Hickman and colleagues, 2021](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196%2821%2900278-3/fulltext)), with 59% feeling very or extremely worried and 84% saying they felt at least moderately worried. The study found a high number of negative perceptions of climate change: “75% said that they think the future is frightening and 83% said that they think people have failed to take care of the planet.” Furthermore, respondents “rated governmental responses to climate change negatively and **reported greater feelings of betrayal** than of reassurance.” Decisions made now around the role of National Parks have the potential to impact the state of the climate and biodiversity for the future that young people will inherit. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child articulates that, “Children and young people have the right to say what they think should happen, when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have their opinions taken into account” (Article 12). Therefore, it is essential to take young people’s views into account on the future of National Parks in Scotland and to communicate this future and this process clearly with young people.

3 Disabled people are more likely to be disproportionately impacted by the effects of climate change than able-bodied people ([UNEP, 2019](https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/how-climate-change-disproportionately-impacts-those-disabilities)). If the impacts of climate change are going to disproportionately impact disabled people, their needs must be at the forefront of considerations that attempt to address climate change. This includes National Parks if they will have a role in contributing to achieving net zero and biodiversity restoration targets. Despite this, a report by the Open Society Foundation, authored by [Kett and colleagues (2021)](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/epidemiology-health-care/sites/epidemiology_health_care/files/disability_and_climate_justice_research_project_final_to_share.pdf) found, “people with disabilities remain on the fringes of the climate justice agenda and the climate movement.” A [status report](https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/sites/default/files/drcc_status_report_english_0.pdf) on “Disability Inclusion in National Climate Commitments and Policies” found that disabled people are left out of the majority of State’s climate adaptation policies: “in cases where disability has been included, it is largely to indicate the vulnerability of persons with disabilities to climate change impacts or to signal the need for their inclusion, without providing concrete measures to enhance their resilience and adaptive capacity.” An Open Access paper in The Lancet Planetary Health discusses “why the rights of people with disabilities are crucial for understanding climate-resilient development pathways” ([Eriksen and colleagues, 2021](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2542519621002333)). This paper provides practical insights from disabled people about how to increase the accessibility of National Parks for people with disabilities and how to engage them in early stages of the development of National Parks.

4 The majority of ethnic minority people in the UK live in urban areas ([The Outward Bound Trust](https://www.outwardbound.org.uk/blog/diversity-in-the-outdoors)). Data in Scotland is scarce, but in England and Wales, “81.5% of the general population lived in an urban location…the ethnic groups most likely to live in an urban location were Pakistani (99.1%), Bangladeshi (98.7%), and Black African (98.2%). A report by the [CPRE (2021)](https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/August-2021_Access-to-nature-in-the-English-countryside_research-overview.pdf), found “data [in England] shows that ethnic minorities have on average 11 times less access to greenspace. And, of the time people from BAME backgrounds (identification used in original research) spend in green spaces, only 15% of it is in the countryside.” The ONS found “the percentage of homes without a garden is higher among ethnic minorities, with Black people in England nearly four times as likely as White people to have no outdoor space at home” ([ONS, 2020](https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/oneineightbritishhouseholdshasnogarden/2020-05-14)) and this lack of access can impact race-based health inequalities ([Collier, 2020](https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/the-race-factor-in-access-to-green-space)).The environment sector itself suffers from a lack of ethnic diversity, with environmental professionals ranking 201st out of 202 occupations for diversity ([Policy Exchange, 2017](https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/The-two-sides-of-diversity-2.pdf)). This lack of representation has a direct impact on these communities, as their perspectives are commonly left out of discussions on climate and the environment. Engagement with ethnic minority people could not be conducted at this stage due to scheduling conflicts. However, since they are a key group historically and currently impacted by inequalities of access and lack of representation, conducting bespoke engagements with ethnic minority groups where possible during future consultation periods is essential.

**Youth Views on National Parks**

5 Young Scot carried out an engagement event with young people on the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy, 30x30, and National Parks. Engagement on these three topics was done simultaneously to minimise the risk of stakeholder fatigue. This paper summarises the findings from the National Parks part of the engagement event.

6 Young people were asked to identify issues or challenges that young people face in relation to National Parks. By far the most frequent response was the matter of access and accessibility, not just in terms of transport, but in terms of disability too. Another theme that emerged was cost of both designating a National Park and needing the equipment to enjoy activities in outdoor spaces. Young people also felt there were other challenges including: having little influence on how National Parks are managed, vandalism, lacking navigational and first aid skills, the discouraging effect of having too many visitors, unpredictable access to fresh drinking water, feeling bored during visits to National Parks, and the lack of National Parks with coastal areas. There was also a query raised around what a National Park designation actually means in Scotland: “Does this make protecting nature easier or more difficult?” What National Parks are and what they do needs to be communicated more clearly with young people.

7 Young people were then asked what they felt a successful National Park for young people would look like. The most prevalent answer was that the National Park would be accessible. A successful National Park has to be accessible in general, and, specifically, for disabled people. The next most prevalent answer was around available facilities. This includes things like toilets and water fountains, but also extended out to information facilities, that inform visitors of the wildlife that is also “using the space.” Young people also felt there needed to be a balance of providing access for people to explore nature and work in the Park and protecting areas for wildlife. Relatedly, there was an articulated need for the National Park to take a “Holistic approach – can a circular economy be built into a new park? How would any waste be managed?” Some young people made specific reference to a National Park needing to prioritise biodiversity. The marine theme occurred repeatedly concerning the potential for marine National Parks, collaborating with Marine Protected Areas and restoration initiatives, as well as marine concerns being raised: “people can’t see how degraded our seas are too, there are Marine Protected Areas but trawling can still occur on them.” Young people also mentioned the importance of effective management in National Parks, with a successful National Park needing “policies [that are] enforced to ensure the area is protected and respected.” Other successful features of National Parks included: good signage, access to basic skills needed to engage with the area (examples given were navigation and identification skills), the provision of engaging activities, an increased number of visitors to the National Park, youth-based opportunities, “such as the Loch Lomond youth committee and junior rangers,” and, lastly, young people reported that a successful National Park for young people is one where they feel welcome.

**Disabled People’s Views on National Parks**

8 To gather the views of disabled people on the development of a new National Park in Scotland, Disability Equality Scotland (DES) carried out a poll on its members. DES compiled the findings in a report, which can be found at the end of this paper.

9 Out of 99 respondents, the majority, 88%, of respondents answered ‘Yes’ to the question, “Do you support proposals to establish a new National Park in Scotland by 2026?” 12% (12 respondents) said ‘no’.

10 When reflecting on their answers, respondents identified benefits to the environment, economy, health and wellbeing. For example, “Scotland has so many beautiful spaces and further work that will take place to preserve this is very welcome. I also think it will benefit the health and wellbeing of disabled people if designed and delivered correctly”; “National Parks conserve the area and also bring tourists creating jobs and boosting economy”; and “Any protected area for the benefit of wildlife and nature will be supported by me. I am a firm believer in getting nature looked after.”

11 Concerns raised focused on the financial implications of creating a new National Park and whether this was considered a priority during the current cost of living crisis. Full quotes are provided in the Report (see below).

12 Respondents identified key factors required to ensure the accessibility and inclusion of a new National Park for disabled people. These key factors include: pathways, seating, buildings, toilets, transport, information and signage. One example from each is given in this paper.

13 **Pathways**: Respondents note the importance of ensuring that areas of a new National Park feature level access pathways: “Far too often parks of all kinds don’t have a proper path, so trying to either walk or use a wheelchair is near impossible. I respect the fact that they are parks and should be “wild” as possible, but there still should be at least one pathway for not just disabled but people with prams and anything else that needs a good flat surface.” It was also noted that a **network** of usable paths should be available.

14 **Seating**: people with reduced mobility may require benches and shelters at regular intervals. When placing these benches and shelters, care must be taken to not arrange them in ways that may create barriers for people with vision loss.

15 **Buildings**: buildings must be accessible. This includes step-free access to the entrance, wide enough doorways and corridors, suitable lighting and acoustics, and hearing loops.

16 **Toilets**: essential adequate toilet facilities are needed, including Changing Places Toilets, which provides sufficient space and equipment, including a height adjustable changing bench and a hoist for people who are not able to use the toilet independently.

17 **Transport**: strong transport links are essential for increasing accessibility for disabled people. To achieve this there must be sufficient blue badge spaces and accessible modes of public transport.

18 **Information and signage**: “Information about the National Park, including how to navigate and access services must be produced in a variety of accessible formats. Examples of accessible formats include: audio, Braille, British Sign Language (BSL), Easy Read, large print, and plain text. It is also important to embed accessible information principles such as concise messaging that avoids jargon, using a clear, plain font, and ensuring there is sufficient contrast between the text and background colours.”

19 In terms of engaging disabled people in the process of developing a National Park, DES’ report noted “an inclusive design approach ensures that disabled people are involved in the development of a new National Park from the very beginning. This includes **proactive engagement with Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs) and Access Panels across Scotland**. Access Panels are groups of disabled volunteers who work together to improve physical access and wider social inclusion in their local communities. This was reflected through direct quotes of their members who stressed the importance of inclusive design from the outset, the use of Access Panels in new and existing National Parks, as well as urging “the government and other organisations…[to]…work with a range of disability organisations to make sure that they get access right for disabled people.”

**Key Recommendations**

20 Proactively **engage with a range of DPOs and Access Panels** throughout the process of designating new National Parks

21 At future stages of National Park development, **consider the following aspects of accessibility and inclusion for disabled people**: pathways, seating, buildings, toilets, transport, information and signage

22 **Create opportunities for young people to have influence** over the way National Parks are managed through the use of Youth Committees or Youth Boards

23 **Prioritise the accessibility** of National Park sites in terms of affordable physical access to the site, physical accessibility within the site, and making visitors feel welcome to visit that place

24 A National Park has to take **a holistic view**, accounting for its contributions to net zero, biodiversity, the circular economy, employment opportunities, and access to nature for people

25 **Communication is essential**. There are very real concerns that this is an unnecessary expense when people are facing very severe impacts as a result of the cost of living crisis, which are, most likely to impact ethnic minorities ([Zacharek, 2022](https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/ethnic-minority-households-will-be-among-the-hardest-hit-by-the-cost-of-living-crisis)) and disabled people, who bear the burden of a higher cost of living ([SCOPE UK, 2019](https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/extra-costs/)). This is particularly the case for families with severely disabled children as, “In the UK, an additional annual amount of ≈$4200 [the equivalent to $4,200] is needed for the families of a severely disabled child to have the same living standard of their matched families without a disabled child” ([Shahat and Greco, 2021](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8036354/)). The need for spending this money in this area must be justified and provide benefit to these groups.