

Minutes

Pentland Hills Regional Park Joint Committee

2.00 pm, Wednesday 23 August 2021 – Held by Microsoft Teams

Present:

Voting Members:

City of Edinburgh Council – Councillors Gardiner (Convener), Bruce, and Henderson.
West Lothian Council – Councillor Timson.

Non-Voting Members:

National Farmers Union – Bob Barr
Scottish Land and Estates – Tony Stevenson

In attendance:

Justin Venton (Midlothian Council), Charlie Cumming (Edinburgh and Lothians Greenspace Trust), David Jamieson, Jessica Morgado, and Blair Ritchie (City of Edinburgh Council).

1. Minutes

Decision

To approve the minute of the Pentland Hills Regional Park Joint Committee of 20 January 2021 as a correct record.

2. Operational Update

Jessica Morgado (The Senior Natural Heritage Officer) provided a verbal operational update. She outlined the following issues:

Current Staffing Levels

- There were five full-time and part-time Senior Natural Heritage Officers and Natural Heritage Officers.
- Following the departure of one member of staff, PHRP were currently recruiting for a replacement Natural Heritage Officer.
- There were six seasonal positions provided through NatureScots Better Places Green Recovery Fund.
- The team was also supported by:

- 25 Volunteer Rangers who patrol at weekends
- Estate Team (2.5 permanent plus four seasonal staff)
- Friends of the Pentlands
- Natural Heritage Officers from the City team at weekends

Covid-19 Update

- All staff continued to work from home. Hermitage of Braid had been partially opened to allow access to welfare facilities. Harlaw House had been opened to provide a base for seasonal rangers. The Service was looking into reopening the Bavelaw Bird Hide following repairs to the boardwalk.

Funding Update

NatureScot's Better Green Places Recovery Fund

SEASONAL RANGERS

- The seasonal rangers were now well bedded-in to their roles. Each ranger had their own electric vehicle for travelling around the Park, plus access to our 4x4s if necessary. They had been assisting with education of campers / recreational water users, rubbish clearance, and maintenance of gates, boardwalks, fences and access tracks. There had been lots of feedback from the public about the value of the rangers, and requests for the service to be continued. There had also been uptake from land managers on an offer of our seasonal rangers to assist with visitor management when land management operations were underway. PHRP had re-joined the Scottish Countryside Rangers' Association.

TOILET FACILITIES

- 3 x standard and 1 x accessible portaloos had been installed at each of three sites: Threipmuir, Harlaw and Bonaly. These were cleaned to a covid-19 acceptable standard four times a day by a team. Flotterstone public toilets now had extended opening hours and an improved cleaning regime through funding from the same source (last year during the pandemic only one toilet was open when the café was open). The Service were seeing a notable reduction in human toilet waste at all sites as a result.

CAR PARKING WARDENS

- An application to provide six Seasonal Car Parking Wardens was unsuccessful.

Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund

- Funding was awarded for two applications: 1) car park infrastructure improvements and 2) public toilet provision. Funding was not awarded for the proposed campsite at Harlaw Reservoir. The Service was awaiting confirmation of planning permission before they could start work on these projects.

Visitor Management Prevention, Regulation and Reassurance Sub-group

- The Senior Natural Heritage Officer had been attending this national group, formed to create a visitor management strategy in the wake of notably increased footfall in rural areas due to the covid-19 pandemic.

PHRP Visitor Management Group

- As a result of attending the above group, a local group has been formed by PHRP, comprising interested parties such as angling, police, fire and land management representatives. This group had worked together to ensure all users and residents of the Regional Park were updated on recent visitor management efforts.

Police Liaison

- PHRP had increased communications with the Police, with regular updates between Penicuik Police, Edinburgh SW Community Police and the service shared before, during and after each weekend. This improved communication had helped PHRP officers report and follow-up on incidents.

Events

- Public events in Edinburgh's Parks had been largely postponed throughout the pandemic. There had been discussions with the Pentland Land Managers' Association (an organisation representing many land managers in the Regional Park) about the potential of restricting the number of large events in the Regional Park. This followed concerns about increased footfall during the pandemic. These proposals would be shared with relevant stakeholders for comment in due course. Meanwhile three of the annual events which had run for several years were being organised to run in October and December.

Reservoir Safety

- There were ongoing meetings with Scottish Water around improving public safety and reducing conflict between users at their reservoirs in the Regional Park. Some of these initiatives may well also be adopted by CEC at their reservoirs. The Service had assisted with and attended multi-partner events promoting water safety and clean camping, at Harlaw and Glencorse Reservoirs. The Service would like to thank Police Scotland, the Ambulance service, and the Fire service for all their efforts at Threipmuir Reservoir following the tragic drowning of a person using an inflatable craft on the reservoir.

Discussion took place and the following points were made:

- Whether the toilets could open earlier.
- It might be possible to open the toilets earlier than 10.00 am, but not later in the evening, because of the cleaning regime.
- Using the Ranger Service was a possible solution.
- The Convener indicated that the funding from the Scottish Government was welcome and discussions had taken place.
- In the year of the Covid Pandemic, there should be more emphasis on the value of the park, for the mental and physical health of visitors and land managers.

Decision

To thank the Senior Natural Heritage Officer for the verbal update and to note the update

3. Projects and Staffing Update

Jessica Morgado (The Senior Natural Heritage Officer) reported on the Projects and Staffing Update. She indicated that Regional Park Officers had been very busy securing funding and support to deliver the anti-social behaviour, structural and visitor management issues discussed at the last Joint Committee meeting. This Bulletin provided a summary of this activity which included the following:

- £75,000 grant had been received from NatureScot for six seasonal Park Rangers, who would be working a shift pattern with a focus on providing duty cover at hot spots between 7am and 10pm on Fridays-Saturdays-Sundays until 31 October, establishing a seven-day service over the summer months.
- £71,000 grant had been received from NatureScot for twelve temporary toilets at Bonaly and Threipmuir car parks and Harlaw in front of Harlaw house.
- Application had been made to NatureScot for £44,000 to fund seasonal car park Marshalls. However, the submission was unsuccessful.
- £31,000 grant had been received to appoint four Estate Workers and a Supervisor until 31 October to support the existing Estate team across the Regional Park and wider city outdoor estate.
- £35,000 funding received from Visit Scotland to develop a strategic plan for the Development of key routes entering the Regional Park from Currie, Balerno and Penicuik.
- £421,000 conditional grant had been received from Visit Scotland towards the costs of creating an additional 140 car parking spaces, including more for blue badge holders, and installing electric vehicle charging points in the four main car parks at Harlaw, Threipmuir, Bonaly and Flotterstone. Cyclists would also benefit from additional bike stands and public bike pump and repair stations.
- Three new unisex and accessible toilet facilities would also be built at Bonaly, Threipmuir and Harlaw car parks and an extra set of toilets near Harlaw reservoir.
- Police Scotland ran 'Operation Boxy' in the Pentland Hills Regional Park during July, with a focus on the Edinburgh side of the hills: Bonaly Country Park, Harlaw, Torduff, Clubbiedean and Threipmuir reservoirs/areas. This Operation involved partnership working between Police Scotland, the Regional Park team, Scottish Water and the Fire and Rescue Service. The purpose of the Operation

was to combat anti-social behaviour and encourage responsible access and use of the Pentland Hills.

- Scottish Water had selected the Pentland reservoirs as part of their two-year pilot study “Enabling Access”. As part of Operation Boxy, the Fire and Rescue Service delivered water rescue training on 23 August at Harlaw, with Police manning a stall with responsible leaflets/information.
- Artwork had been created for display on Park bins, which would hopefully help encourage people to use them. This was part of a nationwide initiative from Zero Waste Scotland in partnership with the Scottish Government and Keep Scotland Beautiful.
- The grounds maintenance contractor Glendale had been placed on standby to help clear up particularly dirty campsites at Harlaw and Bonaly Country Park should this be beyond the capacity of existing internal resources.
- NatureScot funding of £16,000 was obtained by ELGT to produce a PHRP Visitor plan. A PHRP Visitor Management Action group had been set up since April with key partners meeting monthly to draft a VM action plan, review the draft Visitor plan produced by ELGT and create a key document which will be used to secure funding to improve infrastructure, signage and access.

The Convener conveyed his condolences to the family regarding the fatal accident. This had been a tragedy, and it was encouraging that there were actions to mitigate against this in future.

Discussion took place and the following points were made:

- Whether there were arrangements to manage and monitor the disabled places, and electrical vehicle points.
- This was still at the design stage and there were plans to engage a consultant, to improve the designs. There were plans to get car park charging introduced.
- The Natural Heritage Service would take care of monitoring and enforcement.
- Whether this would be done within park, or using an outside agency, or linking into Edinburgh facilities and staff
- It was planned to engage an external contractor and go through tendering process.
- All options were still open, but the favoured option was to ringfence the potential income to enhance both the car parks and the wider park.
- It might be possible to operate a separate cleaning regime, but more details were necessary.
- There was a need for a dedicated police officer for the park and for more dialogue.
- There was a need for more patrolling in the park near resevoirs.
- That Scottish Water were landowners and land managers.

- There needed to be a new way of working for water safety.
- The Natural Heritage Service had taken various measures to address water safety, which included liaising with Scottish Water, a campaign on social media and working with schools.
- To address water safety, further work and engagement would take place with the public and there should be a coordinated effort to this end.
- The Senior Natural Heritage Officer indicated that she looked forward to working with the various working groups.
- Whether the quad bikes were owned by the police or the council
- That it was a positive development that there working together with farmers and stakeholder.

Decision

- 1) To note the report.
- 2) The Senior Natural Heritage Officer to liaise with Midlothian Council to determine how funding was secured for the quad bikes with a view to securing additional funding and to explore the possibility of Edinburgh and Midlothian Councils sharing the quad bikes.
- 3) The Senior Natural Heritage Officer to liaise with Police Scotland with a view to getting more sustained police presence in the Regional Park.

(Reference- report by the Senior Natural Heritage Officer and Parks and Greenspace Manager)

Declaration of interests

Councillor Bruce declared a financial interest in the above item as he was as a paid employee of Police Scotland and took no further part in the proceedings for this item.

4. Extending Membership of the Joint Committee

The Parks and Greenspace Manager reported on the proposal for extending membership of the Joint Committee.

He indicated that the Pentland Land Managers Association (PLMA) had requested to become a voting member of the Joint Committee. Discussions with representatives of PLMA and representatives of other organisations with a substantive interest in the management of the Regional Park had determined that there was support for the proposal and also interest in extending voting membership to an organisation representing countryside user interests. City of Edinburgh Council Committee Services advised that only elected local authority members were competent to allocate local authority funding, therefore any non-local authority Joint Committee members would need to be excluded from budget related decision-making items.

Discussion took place and the following points were made.

- According to the minute of agreement, the Joint Committee could establish an advisory group or set up other working groups,
- That any non-elected members should be excluded from any budgetary issues discussed by the Joint Committee.
- Whether there might be an overlap between the Consultative Forum and the Joint Committee if the membership of the Joint Committee was extended.
- There should be discussion with the Consultative Forum, to establish a future structure that was accepted by the majority of the members.
- It would be beneficial to bring other organisations on board, who represented the interests of the park, as well as the land managers.
- Membership could be further extended to visitors and recreational users.
- There were concerns about increasing membership beyond land managers and more discussion was required.
- Any decision to do this should be brought back to Committee for approval.
- It did not make sense that only a limited number of land managers, who owned and managed the land, would be represented.
- There should be more, rather than less representation on the Joint Committee.
- The ELGB Trust should be included and the Friends of the Pentlands should be party to the discussions.
- That the NFU as well as PLMA should be on the Committee. The Pentland Hills were an asset and there should responsible access.

Motion

- 1) To note the outcome of discussions with the Pentland Land Managers Association and other pertinent organisations.
- 2) To invite the Pentland Land Managers Association to become voting members of the Joint Committee and extend this invitation to one or more organisations that could represent the interests of visitors to, and recreational users of, the Regional Park.
- 3) To instruct officers to review the Minute of Agreement (MoA) in light of its decision, reporting an updated draft of the MoA to a subsequent meeting of the Joint Committee.
- 4) To instruct officers to review the purpose, membership and arrangement of the Consultative Forum, as well as its governance relationship with the Joint Committee.

- moved by Councillor Gardiner, seconded by Councillor Henderson.

Amendment

- 1) To note the outcome of discussions with the Pentland Land Managers Association and other pertinent organisations.

- 2) To invite the Pentland Land Managers Association to become voting members of the Joint Committee.
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- moved by Councillor Bruce, seconded by Councillor Timson.

Voting

For the motion - 2
 For the amendment - 2

(For the motion – (Councillors Henderson and Gardiner.)

(For the amendment – (Councillors Bruce and Timson.)

Casting Vote

The voting being equal, the Convener used his casting vote in favour of the motion.

Decision

- 1) To note the outcome of discussions with the Pentland Land Managers Association and other pertinent organisations.
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(Reference- report by the Executive Director of Place)

7. Farmers and Landowners – Any Other Urgent Items for Consideration

It was reported that unauthorised flying drones were becoming an issue and were causing worry to visitors. Also, e-bikes, were becoming increasingly motorised and this required consideration in future.

Decision

- 1) The Parks and Greenspace Manager and Senior Natural Heritage Officer to liaise with the NFU, land managers and Police Scotland regarding the problem of unauthorised drones flying in the Regional Park.
- 2) To include the issue of unauthorised drones on the agenda for the Consultative Forum.

8. Dates for Future Meetings

Committee Services to liaise with the Natural Heritage Service to arrange dates for the next meetings of the Consultative Forum and the Joint Committee.

Decision

PHRP Consultation Forum – To be confirmed.

PHRP Joint Committee – To be confirmed.