Scottish Parliament Rural Affairs Committee

Outdoor Access Inquiry Meeting 18th November 2026

Written Statement: Kenny Auld, Head of Visitor Services, Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority

Headline reflections

- The Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) and wider Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 has provided an essential core framework to responsibly support improved and increased public enjoyment of the National Park.
- World class access rights are challenging to uphold and manage without adequate and consistent resourcing of professional staff and infrastructure. Resourcing gaps can result in down-stream costs around visitor management, environment, health and well-being.
- The principles of responsible public access and land management are now established, with legal precedents and positive case studies showcasing responsible management. Cumulatively, these have provided further clarity as the outdoor access sector has matured.
- Proportionate, credible and clear enforcement processes and deterrents are required for any individuals who disregard any laws. However, increased societal understanding and expectations also play a key role in supporting ongoing positive transitional behaviour change and cultural norms around responsible access.
- It is right that guidance such as SOAC is periodically refreshed to ensure guidance around modern societal, climate or technological trends are reflected, easily understood and effectively communicated.
- A national conversation and approach to responsible behaviours around fires and barbeques would be welcomed.

1. Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority Role and Value

1.1. We have a dual role as both a National Park Authority delivering and investing in an international visitor destination and a statutory Access Authority with legal decision-making powers. We also act as convenor, bringing a range of partners together to develop and deliver shared goals effectively and efficiently.

1.2. Supporting safe and responsible access is a core objective of our National Park Partnership Plan, as well as being linked to National Park Aims.

1.3. Our location is unique: a diverse landscape and region accessible (within an hour's drive) of 50% of the population, welcoming over 4.5 million visitors annually and home to over 15,000 residents. The Park sits at the intersection between urban and rural, which brings both challenge and opportunity regarding outdoor access.

1.4. The importance of our role in promoting and managing responsible access is evident in the cross departmental resource allocation: the dedicated Access Team of three full-time, our Rangers Service (largest in the UK; 23 core and 40-50 seasonal), Visitor Management, Estates, Communications, Engagement & Outreach and Legal teams are all involved in the implementation, maintenance, education and enforcement of outdoor access, including our Camping Management and Loch Lomond Byelaws.

1.5. Complementary to this work, our teams work with partners to develop, deliver and maintain infrastructure which supports responsible behaviour and reduces conflict. This could be a path, gate arrangements, signage or camping facilities. In recent years we have spent over £1 million on the Conic Hill path to ensure future enjoyment of the landscape whilst protecting the environment. We have also spent over £100k per year over the last four years to ensure smaller path and "stitch in time" projects are delivered efficiently to ensure the core path network is fit for purpose and to avoid future high-cost interventions. Separately we support strategic new path investments to support active travel and recreation and associated health, economy and climate gains.

1.6. We work closely with partner agencies including Police Scotland and the Office of the Procurator Fiscal to pursue byelaw enforcement when required. Enforcement is a final step, and necessary credible deterrent within our behaviour change work and our Rangers take an education-led, prevention-first

approach, positively encouraging a responsible citizen mindset, utilising our ability and experience of connecting with a diverse societal mix.

2. **National Park Authority overarching position**

2.1. SOAC and the formalised right of responsible access appear to have generally delivered very positive impacts regionally and nationally, and are a source of pride for Scotland, forming part of our cultural identity. Most of the 4.5+ million visitors we see in the Park each year do the right thing.

2.2. We welcome a review but see no need for significant legislative change around the principles of responsible and considerate access and land management. SOAC sets out a broad and essential 'framework for norms' around what constitutes responsible access. That said, it is appropriate to refresh key elements to ensure that guidance and language are relevant and can be easily communicated and understood.

2.3. It is worth noting that peers within the access sectors of neighbouring countries and further afield look on with envy when they are in a position of seeking to improve public access to land and water for wider public benefits. The starting position for those discussions is very different from that in Scotland.

2.4. The societal, political and economic landscape is very different from two decades ago, when SOAC was introduced. Since then, there have been significant changes in numbers, technology, the economy and behaviours, alongside the very real impacts of worsening climate and nature crises.

2.5. The growth in enjoyment of the outdoors across our region mirrors the national trends, with increased numbers and wider demographics enjoying the special landscape. The existence of SOAC could have played a role in this positive change in participation, alongside the cultural shift around digital media and awareness of opportunities. Growth trends in participation across the National Park over the last 20 years are particularly stark in relation to upland walking (for example, Conic Hill is now enjoyed by over 200,000 people a year, likely a threefold increase on historic levels) and water recreation.

2.6. Responsible and considerate behaviour includes both land management practices and responsible access and behaviour from those seeking to enjoy the land.

2.7. In our experience, most land managers are now working proactively and positively with SOAC and the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 (LRA); however, a minority continue to question the overarching principles and treat their responsibilities as optional, or adhere to them under sufferance. Increasingly, our relationships with land managers straddle public access, land use, climate and nature, and we see this as a positive, more efficient and necessary approach.

2.8. Protecting outdoor access cannot be entirely reliant on bans, restrictions or enforcement; the focus is on educating and empowering people and land managers to do the right thing.

2.9. As part of the review, a refreshed education and engagement campaign reflecting any changes makes sense and would be welcomed. Messaging must be simple, clear and consistent across Scotland, and delivered through appropriate channels and networks. Driving informed peer education and social influence and accountability is key to meaningful, long-term behaviour change.

2.10. Due to the unique nature of our region, we have two regional byelaws covering camping management and behaviours on the water of Loch Lomond. We have experience of how to convey bespoke regional messages alongside national messages.

2.11. Appropriate and well-considered investment in core access infrastructure such as paths, gates and signage also plays a key role in facilitating good behaviour and designing out conflict. The existence of access rights has not changed the fact that most people wish to enjoy any landscape confidently on a clear and well-maintained route.

2.12. Nevertheless, clear and transparent enforcement pathways and credible deterrents are important in managing the behaviours of the minority who are not open to change and have entrenched views on acceptable behaviours and actions which do not align with accepted principles and policy.

2.13. Access authorities and experienced professional staff have a key part to play in communicating these norms and interpreting the context which SOAC

requires on key subjects and scenarios (e.g. privacy). Access authorities also play a key role in informing individuals about cumulative volumes, hidden risks and other considerations, which can only come from a wider view but could affect what is responsible and an individual's decision.

2.14. We recognise that our position differs from that of other access authorities, but take the view that, as a National Park, we have opportunities to act as a pioneer, testing and learning to provide innovative solutions to complex and challenging problems which can be shared and adopted elsewhere.

2.15. We note that Local Authorities, with differing pressures and priorities, in many cases cannot afford the resource commitments that education, infrastructure and enforcement require.

2.16. The economic, social and health value, and the global reputation benefits, attributed to the LRA and SOAC appear not to be reflected in the national monitoring, funding or resources allocated to their implementation and promotion, or to the access authorities and forums tasked with delivering them.

3. **Access Authority Capacity and Resource**

3.1. We are active and engaged in National Access Forum, sharing our knowledge and expertise on a national level.

3.2. Most of our Access Team's time/resource is spent in dialogue with land managers, not users, from a statutory point of view. Instances of escalated and formal conflict between different non-motorised users are rare with only two recorded formally since 2018.

3.3. 205 access complaints have been recorded over the most recent ten years. 161 were resolved (79%), 34 were closed without action (17%), and 10 are ongoing (5%).

3.4. We facilitate the independent Loch Lomond & The Trossachs Local Access Forum which we believe works well, offering scrutiny and independent advice to the NPA, land managers and the wider public.

3.5. We recognise that appropriate funding, expertise and staffing are needed to ensure LRA and SOAC continue to be fit for purpose now and in the future. The Park Authority, like any other organisation is susceptible to changes to annual funding, staffing and partner support but to date the case for investment has been accepted and delivered tangible benefits.

3.6. LRA and SOAC implementation, resource, governance and enforcement are currently inconsistent across Scotland and there is a concern that this does, or could, result and differences in regional expectations across the country. National Parks do not sit in isolation and experiences and education in other areas of the country are important in developing societal change and understanding and respect for access rights and responsibilities.

3.7. We would propose that we have played a key role in the maturation of sectoral expertise and clarity over the last 20 years whilst the legislation and code have become established. In 2018 we were successful in a landmark legal (*Renyana Stahl Anstalt versus Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park Authority*) case which incurred costs and significant levels of officer time over 10 years to establish a crucial precedent and clarification. We also defended a judicial review of our Core Path Plan Review in 2021-22. A clearer legal framework should reduce dubiety on what is acceptable and what will succeed or fail through a court process and shorten disputes which have previously taken multiple years due to uncertainties.

4. **Preventative spend approach**

4.1. SOAC should not be viewed in isolation, nor its implementation siloed within access authority departments or budgets. National and regional evidence clearly indicates that the public value the principle and the "connection to land", as shown by increased visitor numbers, its global reputation and its economic contribution. Its benefits reach well beyond access, into health, wellbeing, cultural identity and responsible citizenship.

4.2. In recent years access professionals have often worked across a broader visitor management portfolio and this can also bring benefits as we collectively endeavour to build a sustainable and inclusive visitor economy that is fit for the future and includes public transport, accommodation and toileting, and national approaches to motorhomes and campervans.

4.3. We consider the investment in access and visitor management as crucial preventative spend. Investment in communications, infrastructure, Rangers,

education and enforcement processes reduces high downstream costs around policing, health and well-being, environmental damage, road congestion and visitor experience.

5. Camping Management Byelaws

5.1. Introduced in March 2017, the first of their kind in Scotland and have played a significant role in protecting some of Scotland's most treasured landscapes while ensuring camping remains accessible and enjoyable for all.

5.2. Nearly 300,000 people have camped in permit areas since 2017, with satisfaction consistently above 90% and complaints down from 324 in 2017 to just 40 in 2025.

5.3. A 10-year Statutory review is currently underway, including a 12-week public consultation. Based on nearly a decade of evidence and stakeholder engagement, the Park Authority has identified proposals across five priority areas for the review: the geographical areas covered by the Byelaws; their seasonal timing; the use of fires and barbecues; the growing use of motorhomes and campervans; and appropriate protections for frontline National Park Rangers. The summer consultation document with additional evidence of interest is available through the link here.

5.4. NPA staff are currently preparing a report and recommendation for NPA Board members in December. After any changes are made, the byelaws submitted to Scottish Ministers and published for a further four-week comment period.

5.5. It is worth noting that the use of fires is a subject of high importance to ourselves and stakeholders. At this time the NPA officer position is that the specific circumstances of our region justify a pragmatic approach to fires which does not permit fires on the ground and where it would be an offence to not put out a fire if asked by a Ranger during a time of high for risk. However there is consensus that national subjects such as fire and barbecue use and motorhomes and campervan management would benefit from a national approach.

6. Loch Lomond Byelaws

6.1. Although predating SOAC, these byelaws are managed, communicated and enforced in a manner complementary to SOAC.

6.2. The strengthened Loch Lomond byelaws which came into force in November 2024, responded directly to changing recreational trends on Loch Lomond, including significant increases in paddleboarding, kayaking, and open-water swimming. The loch has also experienced steadily growing visitor numbers over the past decade, with more people regularly enjoying outdoor activities. This increased visitation places greater pressure

6.3. In 2026, launches at Duncan Mills Memorial Slipway increased to over 3,600, the highest number since 2022.

6.4. In recent years the NPA has invested in a modern and resilient patrol boat fleet and specialist staff resource which is fit for purpose to deliver three patrols across peak days of high activity in summer months.

6.5. Most loch users do so responsibly, supported by our Ranger and Visitor Management staff who are highly experienced in delivering a prevention led approach, applying proportionate enforcement when required and in dealing with occasional challenging behaviour by some loch users. However, recent escalation of more persistent extreme and challenging behaviours this year along with unprecedented levels of byelaw violations on Loch Lomond has tested our processes, capacity and resilience in recent months.

6.6. To date, the team have reported 475 Loch Lomond Byelaws contraventions this season. Of those 475, 377 contraventions were attributed to powered vessels and of those 293 are attributed to jet ski activity. This represents a 106% increase from the entire 2025 level of 142 contraventions by jet ski operators.

6.7. Existing enforcement (byelaws) is resource-intensive (average £712 per escalated case, 27 staff-hours).

Additional supporting data and evidence

Regional

- Taking the Retail Price Index (RPI) into account, the economic net gain from tourism in the Park to the visitor economy is 7.7% overall, rising from £578m in 2024 to £623m in 2025.
- Employment levels have increase slightly in 2025/26, especially in indirect employment giving an overall figure of 5683 employed directly in the tourism and hospitality field.

Scotland and UK National

National Parks UK Nov 2026 Report - https://heyzine.com/flip-book/answer-is-national-parks

Based on a survey carried out this summer of 3,000 people across England, Scotland and Wales, supported by 30 in-depth interviews, the research found:

- 75% of people say feeling connected to nature is important.
- 89% say reducing stress and pressure in daily life is important.
- 73% care strongly about protecting and restoring natural habitats.
- 69% care strongly about flooding and extreme weather.
- 90% believe National Parks can help support people's mental health and wellbeing.
- 80% agree National Parks are taking action on climate and nature.

Ramblers 2025 access survey - www.ramblers.org.uk/ScotSurvey