

The Abernethy/Glenmore wildfire, the Cairngorms National Park Authority and helicopters

Description

This morning the board of the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) is meeting for the first time since the Abernethy/Glenmore wildfire which started on Wednesday 15th July. Increasingly the CNPA has started to resemble the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority where staff take all the decisions and the board acts as a figleaf. The agenda for the meeting ([see here](#)) is threadbare. Given the significance of the wildfire for the National Park Authority at the very least one might have expected a dedicated agenda item under which board members were asked to consider what happened and the implications for the future but there is none. Instead, scattered through the Chief Executive's and Convener's 15 page "report" ([see here](#)) there are various titbits of information about the CNPA's response to the wildfire, without any attempt at structured description or analysis.

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For information

Title: Chief Executive Officer Report and Convener

Prepared by: Grant Moir, Chief Executive Officer

Purpose

To highlight to Board Members the main strategic areas of work that are being undertaken by the Management Team. These are areas where significant staff resources are being directed to deliver with partners the aspirations of the National Park Partnership Plan (NPPP).

Glenmore and Abernethy Wildfire

1. The Glenmore and Abernethy wildfire was one of the largest incidents to have occurred since the National Park was established. There are many key issues that need to be taken forward as we look to ensure that the National Park is more prepared for these incidents in the future. This goes from land management and aerial support to communications and resources. The Scottish Government will be taking part in the debriefs associated with the wildfire. The Scottish Government also sits on the national wildfire oversight group which is reviewing the national wildfire action plan. Wildfire management will also be a major part of the next National Park Partnership Plan that will be consulted on from mid-October.

While the Agenda lists the CEO and Convener's update as being "For Decision", the paper is "For information" only.

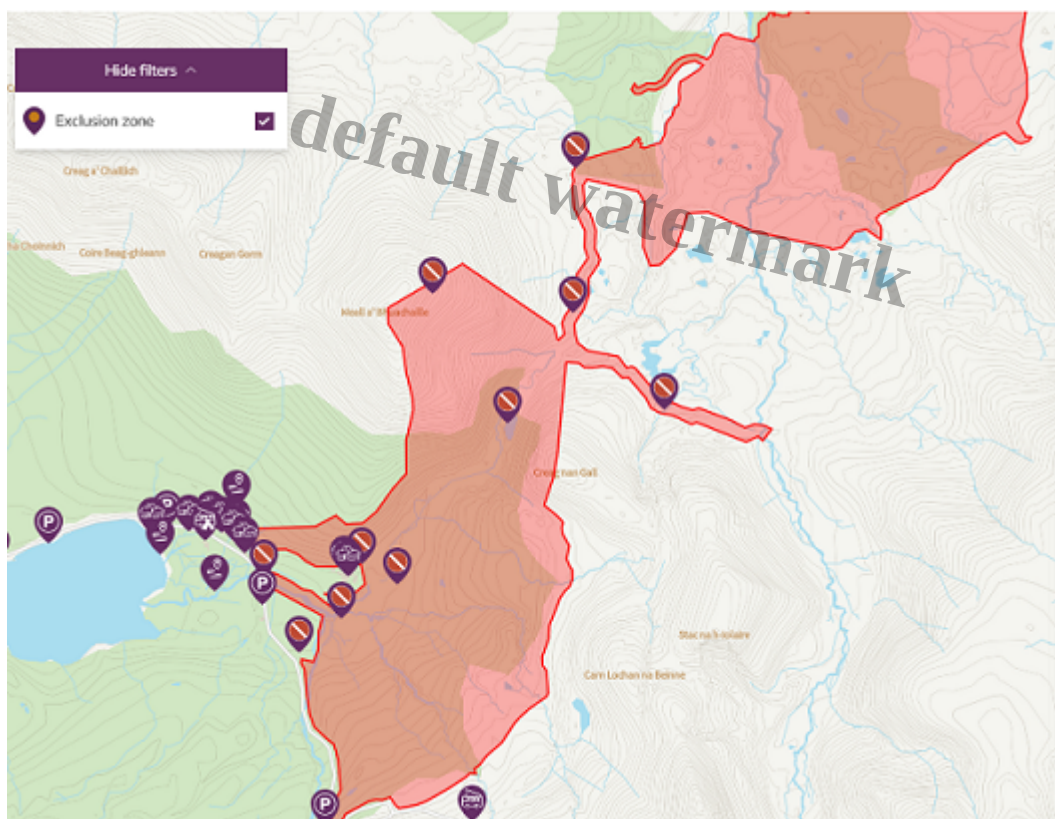
So why, if there are many key issues that need to be taken forward as a result of this incident, are these issues not even listed? And who has decided that wildfire management will also be a major part of the next National Park Partnership Plan (NPPP) that will be consulted on from mid-October?

The CNPA's current NPPP (2025-27) committed to reducing wildfire risk by developing an Integrated Fire Management Plan. This was adopted in July/August 2025 ([see here](#) for plan). The statement from staff that wildfire management needs to be a "major part" of the next NPPP is an acknowledgement that the CNPA's new Integrated Fire Management Plan was found wanting when

it came to fighting the Abernethy/Glenmore wildfire. So why have they not described in a board paper what worked, what didn't and ask board members what needs to change?

Nowhere in the CEO's report is there a suggestion that the current Integrated Fire Management Plan needs to be reviewed as a matter of urgency, so improved arrangements for fire fighting can be put in place before next year. Nor is there any consideration of the cause of the wildfire and whether the CNPAA's Fire Management byelaw made any difference.

As for consideration of other important matters, like the impact for conservation or management of access rights, both of which have been covered in various posts on parkswatch ([see here](#) and [here](#) for example) there is not a mention. CNPA staff have not even provided board members with a map of the areas and landholdings affected by the fire, despite apparently flying drones all over the area in an attempt to find thermal hot spots.



Screenshot of the CNPA unlawful Exclusion Zone 24th September. The area included in the zone and the number of paths that are described as closed have not changed from last week, despite local dignitaries walking along the track to An Lochain Uaine to meet King Charles last week.

While it is truly fascinating to learn that the CNPA's following on social media has increased as a consequence of the wildfire (e.g. Facebook followers are up 11,251 to 53,316), the only significant information comes in the "Update" from the Convener of the Board, Sandy Bremner, and concerns helicopters.

Glenmore and Abernethy Wildfire

1. Made immediate contact with Scottish Government (SG) officials regarding logistics support from the first confirmation of a wildfire on day one, pursuing aerial back-up as a critical necessity in conjunction with the Park Authority senior staff until late evening.
2. Early morning day two, convened then chaired joint Park Authority / SG officers meeting, exploring all routes to provide urgent aerial support to supplement ground operations. Continued to liaise with the Park Authority staff and SG on strategic responses in the days following the outbreak.
3. Attended meetings with First Minister John Swinney MSP at Glenmore on July 21, stressing the impact of the wildfire on communities, businesses, livelihoods and natural heritage in one of the National Park's most sensitive areas of nature designation. Explained the National Park's extensive preparations for heightened wildfire risks, including the development of the UK's first Integrated Wildfire Management Plan, the introduction of a wildfire byelaw which had already led to a significant reduction in incidents of recreational fires, and the funding of firefighting equipment to support estates from our Climate Adaptation Fund. Stressed the necessity of developing standby access to air support as a national contingency, given previous experience and the certainty of further wildfires. At the same meeting, the First Minister committed to considering other countries' models for responding to wildfires.

Sandy clearly made strenuous efforts to get the Scottish Government to agree to helicopters being deployed to fight the fire from Day 1. Unfortunately, it appears the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service did not deploy helicopters until about 30 hours after the wildfire had started, by which time it was completely out of control and uncontainable even with helicopters.

11. Wrote on behalf of the Park Authority Board to SG's Director General Net Zero, and senior EnFor Directorate officials for the further attention of all relevant ministers, highlighting urgent action requested regarding the establishment of a national on-demand aerial firefighting service, and the implementation of strategic actions for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) to enhance their wildfire capabilities.

It is also very significant that Sandy also then highlighted the need for a "national on-demand aerial fire fighting service" to the Scottish Government. It appears his efforts, along with the local campaigning on the need for helicopters, prompted the announcement from the Justice Secretary, Neil Gray, on 3rd September, that helicopters would be put on standby at times of high fire risk in future ([see here](#)).

This raises the question, however, of why Sandy and other board members did not demand an "on-demand aerial firefighting service" before approving their Integrated Fire Management Plan last year? Instead of a national fire fighting service that plan recommended the use of helicopters should be up to estates who should take out insurance to pay for them:

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Recommendation	All landholdings should develop a clear policy as to who can call out a helicopter and when. Relevant staff must be clear as regards the circumstances when they are permitted to call for helicopter assistance.	
Recommendation	All landholdings should consider having insurance to cover the cost of helicopter assistance at a wildfire. If a landholding has an insurance policy, it must be clear as to exactly what is covered.	

Recommendations on helicopters from the CNPA IFMP.

This was always pie in the sky. Helicopter insurance is not even a requirement of the muirburn licensing scheme which came into effect 10 days ago. No helicopter company is going to keep helicopters on standby just in case muirburn gets out of control or is started accidentally, as when a flare from another helicopter was responsible for the first of the wildfires on Dava Moor last year. The cost of fighting wildfires that get out of control and last for days, such as that at Glenmore/Abernethy, is also so great as to be uninsurable. (While I believe helicopter wildfire insurance is unworkable, I am in the process of submitting FOI requests to find out which of the landholdings affected by the Abernethy/Glenmore wildfire had insurance).

So why did Sandy and other board members ever agree to these recommendations when clearly Sandy and senior staff knew from the moment this wildfire started that helicopters were required?

And more to the point, why not admit publicly in a board paper that this and other recommendations in the Integrated Fire Management Plan were not fit for purpose and therefore that that plan needs to be revised?

Sandy's update report also provides another more minor example of the need for this in a very honest paragraph in which he states he was *meeting volunteers, support staff and community representatives at the village hall in Nethy Bridge before being excluded by a SFRS's Incident Commander, along with other elected representatives of public bodies*. Unfortunately, it is left to others to draw the conclusions, that the CNPA's Fire Management Plan is far from integrated, has failed in important respects to improve joint working between public authorities and the current version needs to be incinerated sooner rather than later.

Category

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Tags

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Author

nickkempe

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