

Housing and development planning in the Cairngorms National Park

Description



The biggest development challenge facing the Cairngorms National Park is how to stop developers from building housing on land such as this at An Camas Mor

The consultation on the Cairngorms National Park Authority Main Issues Report ends tomorrow. Following previous posts ([see here](#)) and ([here](#)), this post takes a closer look at housing, which plays a prominent role in the report and features within a number of the Main Issues identified.

Main Issue 2 Designing Great Places

The Report notes that Scottish Planning Guidance now covers designing great places and has identified 6 qualities (Distinctive, Safe and Pleasant, Welcoming, Adaptable, Resource Efficient and Easy to Move Around and Beyond) which it says are necessary to achieve this. The CNPA suggests these should be incorporated into CNPA planning policy and apply to all developments whatever their size.

In my view this does not go nearly far enough and lots depends on how it is interpreted. Larger housing developments in the Cairngorms National Park, most notably in Aviemore, have destroyed local character and are characteristic of suburban type sprawl you could come across anywhere. One thing the Scottish Government Guidance lacks is any guidance about how housing and “place” design fits with the wider landscape and more specifically areas of high landscape importance like National Parks.



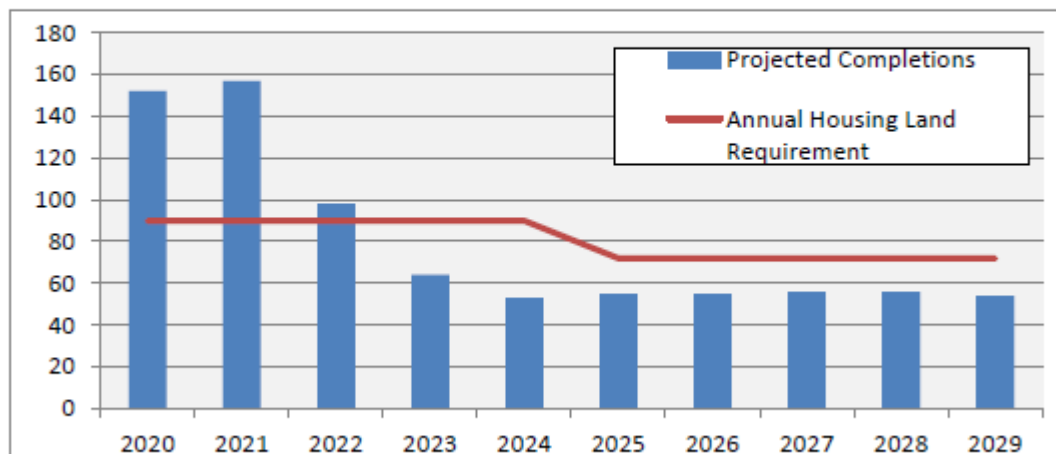
Renovated house at Killiehuntly, on the Glen Feshie Estate, showing how use of natural materials and landscape

Contrast the housing estates with the Victorian buildings in the Cairngorms which still look good (though they may be highly energy inefficient). This is partly because they are built out of natural materials and the CNPA, I believe, needs to build on that legacy. There are some beautiful new houses in the Cairngorms National Park but they tend to be isolated and not constructed by the volume house builders. Its the volume house building which has been the problem and although the developers behind An Camas Mor are trying to address this issue with Gehl Architects, unfortunately that development is in the wrong place.

Another reason for the suburban sprawl is the lower density of the newer housing developments. While the Victorian middle classes of course did have their own gardens, look at the older villages and the houses line the main streets side by side. The contrast between Kingussie and Aviemore is striking. One way to reduce the pressure for development land would be to increase housing density within developments. Maybe the CNPA needs to start putting the case that people living in National Parks shouldn't need private driveways and large gardens when they are surrounded by countryside. Its not housing itself which is poses the problem for nature conservation but the way current design consumes land round about.

Main Issue 4 Housing

Figure 3 Anticipated housing delivery rates excluding the An Camas Mòr new settlement



Data showing that the demand for new housing in the National Park could be met without any need to develop An Camas Mor where it is proposed to build 1500 homes

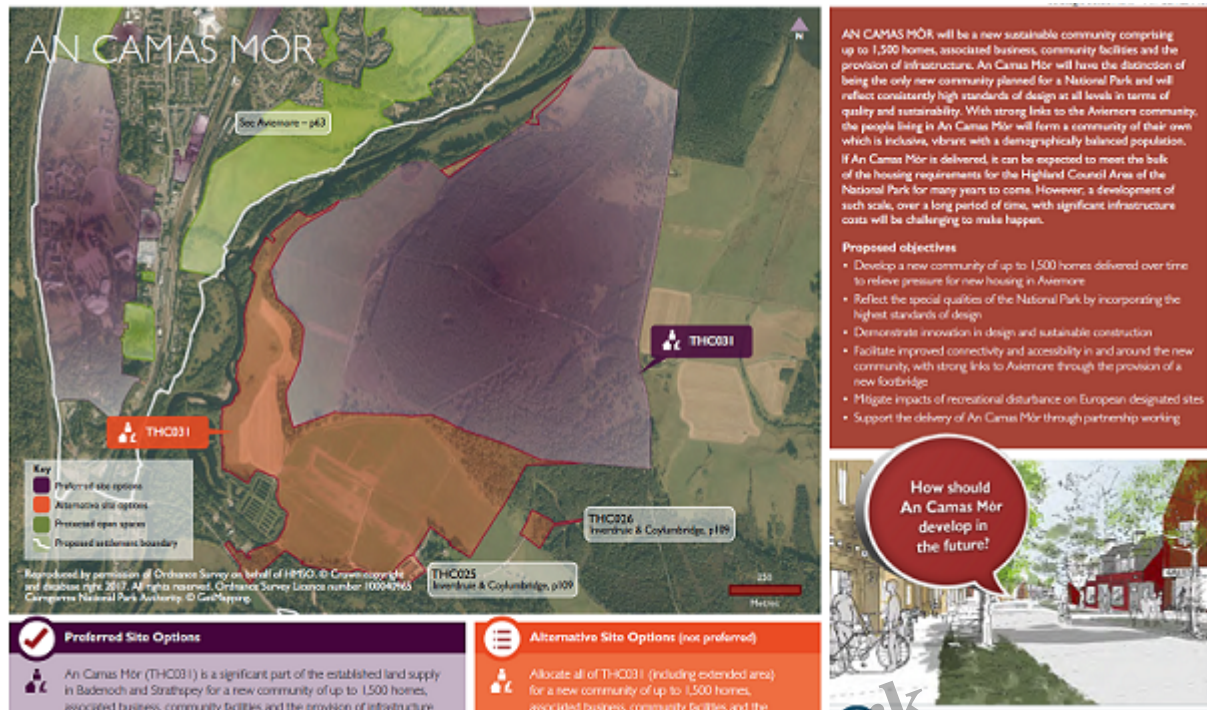
In October, Parkswatch covered the work that the CNPA has done to assemble data about housing in the National Park and to project future demand ([see here](#)). This was based on Local Authority Housing Need and Demand Assessments. While these are far from an exact science and arguably start from the wrong place for a National Park, being based on demand rather than carrying capacity, the

really important thing is that this work shows that existing sites allocated for development are almost sufficient to meet demand and there is no need to build An Camas Mor to meet Scottish Government driven housing targets.



New housing land proposed at Aviemore, top centre – CNPA Main Issue Report

While the CNPA proposes allocating some new land for housing on the north side of Aviemore in case An Camas Mor does not go ahead, it could go a step further and allocate this land for housing NOW and drop An Camas Mor from the Local Development Plan. The developers behind ACM appear to have realised this and I don't believe the recent community consultation ([see here](#)), in which glossy leaflets about ACM were delivered through doors across Speyside, was a coincidence. The developers are fearful that the local community could conclude ACM is not needed and suggest its dropped.



The vast area of mainly native woodland allocated to An Camas Mor – CNPA Main Issues Report

I believe there is no justification for An Camas Mor and the development of a smaller site on the north side of Aviemore is a much better alternative. The new site is far less prominent in landscape terms – ACM is located on raised glacial till which has not been eroded away by the River Spey – and better situated to meet any increase in demand for housing in Aviemore which results from the dualling of the A9 and people wanting to commute into Inverness. In the longer-term, however, the CNPA should resist any further extension of the boundaries of Aviemore.



Derelict farm building, south of Kingussie and A9

It's disappointing that the CNPA did not, in the housing section, mention the small but significant number of derelict buildings within the National Park and the potential to put these back into use. That however might have meant challenging the right of landowners to abandon buildings.

Main Issue 5 The Affordability of Housing

Background

The Cairngorms National Park experiences particular pressures in relation to the affordability of housing. These issues were evidenced through the responses to the recent consultation on the National Park Partnership Plan and happen because of the combination of a number of unique factors.

Firstly, the National Park has experienced strong and continued growth in house prices over recent years. Between 2002 and 2015, the median price of houses in the Park rose by over 220% (from £87,000 in 2002 to £192,500 in 2015).

Secondly, a large proportion of the Park's population work in relatively low paid jobs associated with tourism and average wages have not grown at the same pace as house prices. Evidence shows that median gross household incomes grew by only 46% over the same period from 2002 to 2015 (from £20,701 in 2002 to £30,178 in 2015).

This imbalance between house price growth and wage growth means it has become increasingly difficult for people working within the Park to afford housing. This is best illustrated by the ratio of median house prices to median household incomes. This stood at four in 2002 but had grown to six by 2015, meaning that median house prices are now six times higher than median household incomes and are becoming increasingly unaffordable.

Thirdly, there are unique pressures because of the high proportion of ineffective housing stock (the combination of second homes and vacant dwellings) within the National Park. This stood at around 17% in 2015, compared with around 4% for the rest of Scotland. Second homes form the most significant proportion of this ineffective stock, with around 12% of all houses within the National Park being second homes; a figure which is significantly higher than the Scottish average of around 1%. Whilst second homes can bring significant benefits, they tend to add to affordability pressures. Research in 2008 into the relationship between house prices and second homes in England suggested that for every 1% increase in second home ownership, prices are on average around 1.4% higher per house.

Finally, evidence from council tax payments and data on property sizes shows that the National Park contains a lower proportion of smaller homes and a higher proportion of larger ones than the Scottish average.

Taken together, this data on house prices, incomes, second homes and house sizes reveals that there are significant and unique pressures within the National Park relating to the provision of affordable housing – particularly for those on or below median incomes.

The CNPA's analysis – Main Issues Report

The analysis of the lack of “affordable” housing in the National Park, which stems from the financial crisis ten years ago which hit all those who did not already own houses, is welcome as is the wish of the CNPA to do something to tackle it. Their proposals, to increase the proportion of affordable housing in certain villages to 40% of all new housing, while quite brave given current neo-liberal orthodoxy which would leave everything to the market, do not go nearly far enough. Affordable housing is NOT the same as social housing and setting this at 40% will not provide sufficient housing for the many people who are working in the National Park on or around minimum wage levels and require somewhere decent to live. In my view to meet housing needs ALL new housing in and around Aviemore (including anywhere that is in reasonable commuting distance) that is not social housing should be affordable and, if private developers cannot deliver this, land could be compulsorily purchased and handed over to social housing providers.

The foundation for sustainable economic development is that all people living in the National Park should have somewhere decent to live. Again, the proposal to increase the proportion of smaller homes in housing developments is a step in the right direction – given the situation of people working in the tourist industry – but almost certainly does not go far enough.

Main Issue 8 – Essential Facilities

While this section is titled facilities, its really about infrastructure. It starts off discussing issues such as how to increase school size if new housing developments go ahead, but moves onto a discussion about how planning obligations could be be used to require developers to improve infrastructure. The section makes no mention of the sort of travel infrastructure necessary to make great places – whether footpaths, cycle ways or bus services – and should do so. While there has been a lot done to better connect local communities in the National Park with paths, public transport provision lies far behind.

What happens next

While I hope these posts may encourage some readers to respond to the Main Issues Report <http://cairngorms.co.uk/consultation/mir/> (you can do so by the online survey or email), there will be another opportunity to respond to the CNPA when the draft Local Development Plan appears.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. Development Plan
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