

Will an economic action plan enable sustainable economic development in the Cairngorms National Park?

Description

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The Cairngorms Eco

Facts and Figures

The Park has a unique rural economy with a particularly strong tourism sector



Challenges



Infrastructure limitations

Roads, rail, local public transport, housing, business premises, broadband and mobile

Heavy reliance on low waged tourism sector



87%

of businesses employ less than 10 people

Opportunities

The Plan does contain some excellent graphics which provide some insights into the local economy

The Cairngorms National Park Authority's consultation on its new Economic Action Plan, 2019-22, will close on Friday ([see here](#)). While there are some good things in the plan, this post argues its exhortation for people to work together won't work under our current system and it fails to address the one economic matter over which the CNPA has some control, land-use.

Background

The Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan 2017-22 included an economic strategy. Two years later the National Park have been consulting on a three year Economic Action Plan in effect a list of priority actions designed to implement its Strategy. There was no mention of the need for an Economic Action Plan in the Partnership Plan and the production of the plan appears driven by recent policy developments at the national level.

October 2018 saw the launch of Scotland's Economic Action Plan. Out of this arose recommendations to create a Rural Economic Framework and then in February 2019 a Rural Economy Action Group was set up. This is all top down stuff driven by the Scottish Government. The CNPA has responded very quickly I have seen no sign yet of the LLTNPA responding as yet but has had no real time to re-consider the fundamental challenges facing the economy in the National Park.

Improvements to Highland mainline railway and stations

Strathspey Steam Railway extension to Grantown-on-Spey

Enhancing facilities at Cairngorm Mountain

All the actions relating to transport are crucial for addressing climate change are actions that were produced this summer just past!

That probably accounts for why there is very little new in the plan which appears to consist mainly of a regurgitation of old material designed to tick the Government box. This is a lost opportunity.

The changing context and declaration of a climate emergency

To be fair to the CNPA, they have recognised the strategic context is changing rapidly. There is a section in the Action Plan on the developments that have taken place since they first produced an economic strategy in 2015. This includes consideration of:

- Brexit 41% of businesses in the Highlands and Islands employ EU citizens compared to an average of 25% across Scotland and the EU has funded much conservation and community led development work in the National Park

- UK Government driven City/region growth deals which provide funding to Councils which overlap the National Park. The scenery of the National Park is seen as a means of the surrounding areas being able to promote themselves as good places to do business
- The revised remit of HIE is mentioned but the implications not analysed – what does this mean for Cairn Gorm?
- Digital connectivity – 86.4% of premises had access to fibre broadband at speeds of over 24Mbps and – *Most communities in the National Park, and much of the transport network, are now covered by either 3G or 4G mobile data services and there are plans to address particular gaps*
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Climate emergency – what emergency?

Most importantly the plan refers to the Declaration of a Climate Emergency by the Scottish Government:

The need to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss will have implications for the National Park and specifically land use, housing, transport and tourism.

The problem is the CNPA, in common with most public authorities and businesses, are still talking of the need to do something at some indefinite time in the future – all this – *will have implications for the National Park* – • Actually, the implications are NOW!

The least one might have hoped for was that the Action Plan would contain a provisional list of actions to – *de-carbonise* – • the local economy over the next three years. There is, however, just one – *action* – • to address climate change:

Develop a business-led initiative to promote the circular economy of the National Park and to help businesses adapt to climate change

This is not even a proper action, its yet another plan!

With the A9 dualling going full-steam ahead its not difficult to predict that carbon emissions within the National Park as a whole are likely to increase, not decrease. Yet the A9 dualling is presented – see graphic above – as an opportunity not a challenge! So where are the actions which are required to de-carbonise transport in the National Park?

Where are the statements to say that all new housing in the National Park will be carbon neutral (which would save people a fortune on fuel bills)? How could the CNPA help make tourism sustainable?

There are no significant actions to address the big economic questions.

A conceptual muddle – co-operation and capitalism in the National Park

The Plan is based on some fine sounding words:

The word 'thrive' comes from an old Norse word meaning to flourish and prosper and is a good word to summarise our approach: growing the economy and the natural capital of the Park sustainably and in an inclusive way.

And, the intention of the Plan is to:

'ensure that all relevant organisations in the Park in the public, private and third sectors work together to deliver the economic strategy which is set out in the Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan 2017-2022.'

For this to happen, capitalism as we know it which is driven by profit and results in competition and people fighting for their own narrow interests, NOT the co-operation the CNPA desires will miraculously have to cease. There is NO analysis of the impact of competition in the National Park for example its role in driving down wages in the tourism sector.



Bottom part of graphic at start of post. There is no breakdown of how many people are directly employed

The CNPA rightly highlights the low wages in the National Park – a shocking 26% lower than the Scottish average – as an issue. Its promotion of the Scottish Living Wage throughout the National Park is commendable but is likely to be pie in the sky while the tourism industry is based on cut-throat competition. Indeed the Action Plan suggests as much when it says:

“There has been no significant change in employment sectors, especially in the dominance of the tourism sector. The tourism sector still has a reputation for low wages and seasonal and/or insecure work.”

That is a system issue.

While it might be difficult to analyse the impacts of competition across the National Park at present – as the report says some basic economic data is lacking – the CNPA should have all the evidence it needs for how hard it is to make co-operation work from Cairn Gorm. There, despite multiple requests to co-operate, Highlands and Islands Enterprise continues to do its own thing without any regard for stakeholders. It's hard not to wince when the Plan makes yet another plea for HIE to co-operate:

“A significant review of uplift facilities at Cairngorm Mountain by Highlands and Islands Enterprise in 2018 identified a programme of recommendations for uplift improvements and other facilities estimated at £27 million. However, the closure of the funicular railway at Cairngorm Mountain for ground investigations in late 2018 has created considerable uncertainty about the facility and there is need for a concerted effort to ensure a viable way forward is found, involving a new masterplan for the site in line with the Cairngorm and Glenmore Strategy.” (from section on Ski Centres)

When the government agency responsible for economic development in the National Park won't work together with the CNPA, what hope is there for private landowners doing so?

The conceptual muddle and tensions between relying on the “market” and planning is reflected in other areas of the report. The CNPA says it wants young people who have grown up in the National Park to be able to remain there but at the same time wishes to attract “new talent” to come and live in the Park (which can only add to the significant shortage of affordable housing):

Promote work/lifestyle benefits of the Cairngorms National Park through development of website content, eg Talent Scotland

There is a distinct difference between developing the talents of people who live in a place so they can undertake the jobs of the future and relying on the market to supply the solutions. While the Plan refers to the lack of any higher education facility within the National Park, there is no consideration of what might be needed to enable local residents to develop the knowledge and skills which might be needed in the National Park in future. Part of the reason for that is there is no vision of what the future economy might look like

Land and power

That leads me to what I believe is the most significant omission from the report, its failure to analyse the role of land ownership in the economy of the National Park as it is at present. The omission is all the

more significant because, while I have sympathy for the CNPA in being asked to produce an economic action plan when they hold very few levers with which to influence the local economy, the one area of economic activity where they do have power is over land-use.

While average wages in the National Park are very low, a consequence of most jobs in the area being in tourism, agriculture and forestry, much of the land is owned by the very rich, the 0.1%, from Middle Eastern and European billionaires to the British Royal Family. No analysis is provided of inequality in the National Park, though its possibly one of the most unequal place in Scotland and the rest of the UK. No analysis is undertaken either about how the thinking and actions of this very small group of people is the largest single influence over what economic activity takes place in the National Park.

Related to this there is no analysis of what investment these powerful people are undertaking in their land, what contribution they are actually making to the economy in the National Park. Its investment which above all else creates well paid jobs. While the Economic Action Plan lists current investment in the National Park, what is striking is how much of this comes from the public sector (everything from footpaths to housing and the A9 dualling to nature conservation projects). The Plan refers to:

Significant private sector investment is underway in Braemar with the new Fife Arms open since December 2018; the renovation of the Invercauld Hotel is planned in the year ahead. In Strathspey, significant new tourism facilities have been developed at Grantown East and a new distillery is planned nearby, alongside the proposed steam railway extension.

All this amounts to relatively little. That doesn't mean private investment is bad, its just that the National Park appears to depend predominantly on public investment. So what have all those very rich landowners invested? The Report is silent on that, apart from a mention of Cairngorms Connect, who, led by the billionaire Anders Povslen are undoubtedly investing in the land (e.g at Glen Feshie/Tromie people are being employed to cull deer, plant frees, construct new forest roads, renovate old buildings and operate them as tourism businesses etc). What have other landowners invested and how much of this has been awarded to them in the form of public grants (eg for farming and forestry)? The Action Plan is silent on this.

The Plan claims that every little economic data is available and undoubtedly it could be improved. In a welcome move, as it normally leaves actions to others, the Scottish Government appears to have agreed to improve it. There is no mention of the fact, however, that at present the Scottish Government already hold lots of data, such as awards of forestry grants, which would help indicate levels of investment in the countryside. Moreover, there is NO consideration of the evidence assembled by the Werritty Review and published earlier this year on "The socio-economic impacts of Driven Grouse Moors in Scotland" ([see here](#)). The economics of current land-use thus forms a what is almost a black hole in the heart of the Action Plan.

It needs only saying once but without transforming land-use, we will never tackle climate change or make sustainable use of the natural capital which arises from the land let alone create decent well paid jobs and places for local people to live. This is an Economic Action Plan without any actions to address the issue which is central to the economy of the National Park, land-use.

Instead the most radical the action plans gets it to:

• Investigate potential for new models of business support including community-led and social enterprise models •

Yet more research and plans but no action!

What needs to happen

Scotland is swamped by public authority plans, many of which claim to be about improving outcomes for people, few of which last long and few of which appear to bear any resemblance to reality. Every time I go into the centre of Glasgow, there seem to be more homeless people on the street, something that puts me and many others to shame. What clearer evidence could there be that the Scottish Government is failing to create a happier healthier Scotland, the National Outcomes it promised to deliver? Yet, faced with the housing market, it appears incapable of taking effective action. The CNPA is not alone in failing to tackle the fundamental issues.

We should not, however, be against plans, per se. In the post-truth world of Trump and Johnson, it's more important than ever before that public authorities use evidence to inform decision making and are open about what they intend to do. Half-baked plans, however, which fail to address the issues only serve to feed public cynicism in government. The CNPA's production of half an economic action plan is possibly worse than if it did nothing.

The Action Plan does have some good ideas. It identifies over 20 specific actions including:

- The promotion of the living wage within the National Park;
- Enhancing community and business-led housing delivery;
- Promoting planning and investment in the diversification of ski centres;
- Helping businesses adapt to climate change;
- Investment in local enterprise development including farm diversification;
- Working especially closely with young people to maximise opportunities and address barriers to living and working in the Park.

What it doesn't contain, however, are any proposals to address the one issue which the National Park has both the legal duty and some powers to address, that of land-use. The reason for that is pretty obvious, both it and the Scottish Government, are not prepared to tackle the people who have most power in the National Park, the large landowners. As a consequence most of the content is a mixture of wishful thinking, pious exhortation and a list of things that would happen anyway.

Our National Parks should have a key role in developing new economic models to address the loss of biodiversity and respond to the climate emergency. Incorporated into our National Parks' statutory aims are the duties to promote sustainable economic development and sustainable use of resources that should put them at the forefront of developing new economic models. They will never do this, however, through yet more top-down consultations. They would be far more likely to achieve real change if they sponsored a series of bottom-up discussions and conversations among local residents and external stakeholders focussed on how to change land-use in the National Park. From this they could create an agenda for real change.

Please consider responding to the consultation ([here](#)).

Category

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Tags

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3. grouse moors
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