

**Priorities for the Year Ahead - Synopsis of Presentation by Andrew Harper,
Head of Economic and Social Development Group**

I have been conducting an initial assessment (having only been in post for 4 weeks) of the priorities for my group in terms of our overall portfolio of policy areas. In doing so, there are several *key principles* that have underpinned my analysis, as follows -

- **Balance** - The work of the Group needs to mesh with that of the other groups so that economic, social and environmental issues are considered in the round and truly coherent sustainable development solutions can be found;
- **Adding Value** - We need to be mindful of what other stakeholders are doing and not duplicate existing roles and functions. Some of my initial effort is therefore focused on better understand the existing economic and social development 'playing field', so that we can identify where the Authority can make a difference through, for example' addressing gaps or ensuring that appropriate programmes/projects are rolled out on a Park-wide basis;
- **Enabling** - As far as is practical, I am keen that we should not be involved in direct project delivery. I want to keep the Group to a manageable size and to use external delivery mechanisms to deliver our agenda (whilst recognising that this may not always be straightforward);
- **Longer term policy development versus early 'wins'** - The Authority must be seen to be making a difference to the lives of people within the Park's communities. Much of what we are doing in terms of strategy or policy development is not a quick process. Rather than purely focusing on such long-term work, I want to balance this with a number of early 'win' projects that can be implemented in the near future and that will bring positive benefits without in any way prejudicing the longer-term thinking.

Policy Areas

1. Housing

Everything that I have heard in my first few weeks would indicate that affordable housing should be at the very top of my agenda. I am therefore very keen to progress our thinking on this issue. Having interviewed for the Housing Policy Development Officer yesterday, I am confident that we will soon secure a very capable person to resource this area of our work and to support our Housing Development Working Group

2. Tourism

With around 70% of employment within the Park linked either directly or indirectly to tourism, the sector clearly has an extremely important role in the local economy. I am pleased to note that there is a very strong Tourism Development Working Group in place that is focusing primarily upon formulating a Sustainable Tourism Development

Strategy and a Tourism Marketing Strategy for the Park, along with associated action plans. Linked in to the marketing work, consultants will be commissioned soon to develop a Cairngorms National Park brand. The Authority will also be exhibiting at the tourism trade Expo in Aberdeen in April - an early sign of the pro-active approach we intend to take in further raising the Park's profile as a tourism destination.

3. Social Inclusion

Social inclusion considerations are very much crosscutting in nature and will need to be taken account of in the work of all of the Park Authority's staff. The Park for All Working Group is, of course, undertaking a scoping exercise to identify those groups that should be prioritised by the Park Authority and what initiatives could be pursued to address specifically identified barriers.

Two particular groupings that we are already working with include people with disabilities and young people and I would expect these to remain as priority groups. The All Abilities Communication Network is currently redefining its role and relationship with the Authority. In the future it will act as an arms-length forum that can influence our approach to disability issues, both in terms of strategies/programmes of activity and our corporate policies. With regards young people, a cross-Park schools group has been established and I will be keen to see clear consultative mechanisms and projects develop from this.

4. Community Development

A piece of work has recently been completed by the Scottish Participatory Initiatives and Caledonia Centre for Social Development, which sets out a recommended framework for community development in the Cairngorms. A report on how we might support community development will now be drawn up for discussion and, hopefully, agreement at the next Board meeting. The focus will be very much on communities of place (recognising that these relate to a variety of different interest groups), with support being directed towards addressing locally identified and agreed economic, social and environmental issues.

5. Cultural Heritage

Some initial work has been undertaken to inform the development of a Cultural Heritage Strategy. We are now taking stock of the best way to progress this piece of work and to involve other relevant stakeholders in the process. Clearly there will be linkages to be made both with the Authority's broader work on tourism and on visitor information/interpretation. Something that also needs to be considered is the extent to which we may wish to confine our focus on cultural activity to 'cultural heritage'. The Authority has also been asked by Moray Badenoch and Strathspey Enterprise whether we would like to play a part in the 2007 Scottish Year of Highland Culture, so I will be meet with them soon to explore this opportunity further.

6. Other Economic Development Issues

In addition to the policy areas I've already outlined, there are other specific economic development issues that need to be explored further -

- Transport, which initially will be looked at via the Integrated Public Transport Working Group we are to set up;
- Broadband - Is there anything additional the Authority can do to increase coverage within the Park?
- Skills - the idea of a Park apprenticeship scheme for young people.

In considering a framework for economic development in the Cairngorms, I intend to use the economic audit and business opinion survey that was jointly commissioned by the three Local Enterprise Companies in the Park as the starting point for my thinking.

My Team

Finally, I'd like to say that I've been very pleased to find that I have a good mix of competent and experienced individuals in my team. Having said that, I want to ensure that the team is properly 'fit for purpose'. At the moment the most obvious gap would seem to be someone to handle those economic development issues that don't fall within the specific policy areas handled by the existing staff members. This is a resource issue that I would like to address as soon as is possible to do so.

I will also be trying to ensure that the team reaches its full potential through working together as a coherent unit and establishing appropriate collaborative links outside the team. Hopefully this, and everything else that I have just spoken about, will be clearly set out in the 2004/05 Operational Plan that we are currently pulling together.

Andrew Harper
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