



Cairngorms Economic Steering Group

Hybrid meeting via Teams and in-person, at Grantown-on-Spey, on 23 April 2026 at 2pm

Present:

Jackie Brierton	Cairngorms National Park Authority (chair)
Gavin Miles	Cairngorms National Park Authority
Eilidh Todd	Cairngorms National Park Authority
Kelly Wiltshire	Aberdeenshire Council
Alastair Rhind	Aberdeenshire Council
Michael Dearman	Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust
Craig Mills	Cairngorms Business Partnership
Becca Vincent	GrowBiz
Mike Duncan	Federation of Small Businesses
Julia Latto	Scottish Enterprise (SE)
Allison Carrington	Skills Development Scotland
Michelle Hardie	The Highland Council (THC)

Apologies:

Paul Macari	Aberdeenshire Council
Ian Robertson	Countryside Learning Scotland (CLS)
Gordon Hector	GrowBiz
Nadia Fyvie-Feldmann	Federation of Small Businesses
James Turner	Highland and Islands Enterprise
Beverly Smith	Moray Council
Kirsti Conti	Moray Council
Jamie Bell	Scottish Enterprise
Anthony Standing	Skills Development Scotland
Alice Fogg	Voluntary Action Badenoch & Strathspey (VABS)

Welcome and apologies

Jackie Brierton welcomed everyone to the meeting, gave apologies, and all members in attendance introduced themselves to the group.



Note of last meeting and matters arising

The note of the last meeting was agreed.

- AP 2 - Allison Carrington to share an update on the Careers Services Collaborative, information on the level 5 qualification for rural skills and the Sector Skills Assessment for the Rural Sector (annual report published end October). Allison provided the following information in advance of the meeting with an update on the Careers Services Collaborative included at the end of this action note.
 - Sectoral Skills Assessments are available at [Sectoral Skills Assessments - Skills Development Scotland](#). While there is no rural-specific assessment, many of the sectors covered have a rural footprint.
 - Regional Skills Assessments are available at [Regional Skills Assessments - Skills Development Scotland](#), and the Data Matrix can also be accessed on this page. The Data Matrix enables users to examine individual local authorities and compare them with one another and with Scottish-level data.
 - Information on work relating to Workforce North (Highlands and Islands) is available at [Workforce North - Skills Development Scotland](#).
- AP5 - Jamie Bell to consult with Julia Latto to see if there is any useful data around skills that could be extracted from the Scottish Rural Leadership Programme network. This will be followed up offline.

Cairngorms 2030

Gavin Miles and Eilidh Todd updated the group on the progress of Cairngorms 2030.

Overall Programme

Cairngorms National Park Authority is leading the Cairngorms 2030 programme, a major long-term environmental and community initiative funded primarily by the National Lottery Heritage Fund with nearly £11 million, matched by partner funding to create a programme worth around £20 million over five years.

Main Themes and Projects

- Transforming landscapes
Projects focus on:
 - Peatland restoration
 - Woodland expansion
 - Catchment and flood management



- Nature recovery

Lottery funding is helping accelerate existing rural and conservation work to achieve faster and larger impacts with strong emphasis on using local contractors and businesses, supporting long-term economic development in the region.

- Empowering communities

A significant innovation is the Community Managed Climate Grants Fund. This £1 million fund uses a participatory democracy model where communities help decide funding priorities rather than public bodies alone.

A panel of residents has been recruited from across the National Park:

- 250 applications received
- Nearly half had never engaged with the Park Authority before
- Participants are paid for their time and lived experience.

In addition, Arts, Culture & Education projects support:

- Climate learning in schools
- Community arts and culture initiatives
- Collaboration among local creatives to strengthen long-term economic opportunities.

Climate-focused education builds on existing regional climate hub work.

- Rethinking how we travel

Active travel and cycling projects are progressing well. Larger transport projects have been more difficult because the Park Authority is not a transport authority and depends on external funding and partnerships. “Cycle Friendly Cairngorms” is highlighted as a successful and manageable initiative.

- Championing wellbeing

Strong focus on green health and outdoor wellbeing:

- NHS-supported green health prescriptions
- Volunteering linked to health outcomes
- Outdoor activities integrated into healthcare approaches.

A pioneering outdoor dementia initiative in Glenmore led to the UK’s first outdoor dementia centre with expansion of similar centres elsewhere in Scotland due to its success.



Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan 2027-2032

Gavn Miles outlined the development of the next Partnership Plan for 2027–2032, including its timeline and key priorities.

- The draft is currently being prepared, with public consultation planned from October to December. Revisions will follow in early next year, before Board approval in March and final ministerial approval likely in April or May.
- The new plan differs slightly because of changes in legislation through the Natural Environment Bill, which places stronger obligations on public bodies to actively help deliver the plan rather than simply consider it. Since the previous plan already set long-term goals toward 2035–2040, this update is intended more as a refinement and tightening of priorities rather than a complete overhaul. The emphasis is on being realistic and focused about what can be achieved over five years.
- Key economic themes to consider include:
 - Community wealth building - will be embedded throughout the plan as a guiding principle.
 - Housing and transport infrastructure - remain major barriers to economic growth, especially because businesses struggle to attract and retain staff due to lack of affordable housing and limited transport options.
 - The plan aims to better support the large number of small businesses in the National Park, which can often fall through gaps in existing business support systems.
- A significant shift in thinking is recognising that different parts of the National Park face different regional pressures eg. major developments around the Inner Moray Firth and northern Scotland are expected to affect areas like Badenoch and Strathspey.
- The visitor economy is particularly important in more rural areas where tourism underpins many direct and indirect jobs. Growth in off-season tourism, helped by winter marketing, is seen as especially positive because it supports year-round employment, better job security, and potentially higher wages.
- Ongoing change in the land management sector, driven by government policy and environmental objectives is garnering concern within the industry. Even though many jobs are changing rather than disappearing entirely these shifts can have major impacts on small rural communities that rely heavily on farming and estate employment.
- The Park Authority is piloting projects through Cairngorms 2030 to explore new estate business models and support rural employment adaptation. One example is the



proposed subsidisation of deer stalker roles to support deer management objectives where traditional sporting income may no longer sustain those jobs.

- Members welcomed the community wealth building approach and identified opportunities for the National Park with Aberdeenshire gaining investment zone status.

Partner Updates

- **Cairngorms Business Partnership**

- Spring business barometer survey complete, though response rates from businesses have declined this year. A plan is being developed to increase business participation in future surveys. Survey findings show businesses are under significant pressure from multiple external factors, but overall optimism about the future remains relatively strong. Tourism businesses are reporting healthy forward bookings despite current challenges. CBP and 56 Degrees are hosting a session with businesses in the coming weeks to discuss survey findings in more detail and share results.
- CBP engaged positively with Highland Council through business engagement sessions. A recent “Meet the Assessors” event at the Cairngorm Hotel attracted 23 businesses and received very positive feedback. CBP is exploring similar engagement sessions with other councils, including Aberdeenshire.
- CBP has launched a new membership structure this month. Entry-level membership fees have increased from £102.50 to £150 annually, though CBP remains cheaper than neighbouring Chambers of Commerce by around £60–£70. The new membership structure has generally been well received.
- Successful winter marketing campaign, “Winter Comes to Life,” funded by Park Authority. Businesses have reported strong winter trading linked to the campaign.

- **The Highland Council**

- The visitor levy is progressing. Legislation allowing a flat-rate charge per room has passed parliamentary stages but has not yet been enacted, which is expected in autumn. The Council is deciding next steps, and if a flat-rate model is pursued, there will likely be a 12-week public consultation at the end of this year and into early next year.
- Businesses within the National Park will continue to be signposted to the Park’s own funding streams rather than Highland-wide schemes.
- The “Be Connected” digital platform has launched to help communities access funding, in-kind support, and showcase local projects. Several projects in Kingussie are already featured, including a proposed paddle court project.



- The Community Benefits Project Bank is currently being piloted within the Be Connected platform and is expected to launch publicly in May.
- Community wealth building legislation has now received Royal Assent and become law. However, there is still uncertainty about how local authorities, regional bodies, and organisations such as the Park Authority will coordinate and align community wealth building plans and reporting structures. More clarity is being sought from the Scottish Government.
- Businesses in the Park area remain eligible to access Business Gateway services through Highland.
- Highland's employability team is preparing to launch a new employer recruitment support offer, including grants of up to £10,000 for employers who recruit people facing significant barriers to employment, such as health conditions or disabilities. There will also be opportunities for paid placements within third-sector organisations. Promotional materials are expected in the coming weeks.
- **Aberdeenshire Council:**
 - The organisation has a Community Wealth Building strategy and is working closely with community councils to build local community capacity.
 - Community Wealth Building work is being linked to the Energy Charter and energy development community benefits initiatives.
 - Work is underway on the Good Food Nation agenda, which is expected to connect with the National Park.
 - A collaborative regional approach is being developed with Aberdeen City Council, Moray Council, and NHS Grampian.
 - Although each public authority will have its own plan, consultation, research, and data gathering are intended to be carried out collaboratively across the Grampian region.
 - A new Business Gateway manager, Chris Muir, has recently started in post.
 - Work continues around the Investment Zone and related skills development.
 - Visitor levy discussions had been paused pending clarity on flat-rate legislation progressing through Parliament, but this will be revisited once there is more certainty for Aberdeenshire.
 - Business Gateway advisors could help raise awareness of alternative funding opportunities available to businesses in the national park.
 - Business Gateway support is available not only for startups but also for established SMEs, including businesses with up to around 200 employees.



- Employability funding is available to help parents with transport costs to access work opportunities.
- Additional support is available through the No One Left Behind programme, including paid work placements.
- Support is provided through both employability key workers and Business Gateway advisors for businesses and residents within the National Park.
- The No One Left Behind challenge fund was administered through the local employability partnership.
- A lived experience panel was involved in reviewing applications for the challenge fund.
- The challenge fund allocation has now been fully committed.

- **Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust**
 - Building community wealth through operating the Glenmore Visitor Centre after taking over the centre in late 2024.
 - Long-term sustainability is a concern for the Trust, particularly recruiting and retaining directors. This shortage of leadership capacity is limiting the trust's ability to pursue new opportunities, including plans for a permanent ice rink that recent feasibility work suggests could succeed.
 - The Trust finds that grant funding is confusing and difficult to navigate without expert support, often rushed and some climate grant schemes inflexible.
 - The Trust intends to campaign more actively on wildfire preparedness because of the threat it poses to the community and local economy.

- **GrowBiz Scotland**
 - GrowBiz has entered a new financial year with strong results: around 120 clients were supported during the year, including 50 new clients. Enterprise facilitators delivered an average of 21 client interactions per month. Around 36% of clients were at the new or pre-startup stage, showing continued strong interest in starting businesses.
 - The entrepreneurial education project in schools, although officially ending in March, was successful. Schools involved included Kingussie High, Grantown Grammar, Pitlochry, and Blairgowrie, with strong engagement from pupils across S1–S6. An application has been submitted to extend the schools project further, with a decision expected in the coming months.
 - Looking ahead to 2026–27, the outlook is positive and focused on continued growth.



- The James Hutton Institute, a partner with GrowBiz in the European Ruralactive project, is hosting a three-day masterclass at Glensaugh Farm near Laurencekirk from 8–10 June. The farm is working towards becoming climate negative and is showcasing a range of innovative sustainability and climate-focused research projects. The event will feature presentations and discussions led by researchers and principal investigators involved in the work, with a focus on connecting science and policy. It is aimed at people interested in policy, research, and environmental innovation. Alongside the masterclass, a peer-to-peer exchange for project participants will run simultaneously. Attendance is free, and participants can attend individual sessions or the full programme depending on their interests.
- **Skills Development Scotland**
 - Significant work is underway with Scottish Government on skills reform and future workforce planning. Responsibility for apprenticeship delivery is moving from Skills Development Scotland to the Scottish Funding Council.
 - The Scottish Government plans to strengthen regional skills planning and sector-based (sectoral) skills planning with a more directive approach. Sectoral needs assessments are being developed in partnership with organisations across Scotland. Priority sectors will be selected by government based on economic need, although these have not yet been announced.
 - Current work is focused on:
 - Defining what sectoral needs assessments should include
 - Understanding what partners expect from them
 - Workforce North is playing a key role in expanding training provision and apprenticeship opportunities in line with regional economic demand. This work covers Highlands and Islands areas and overlaps with the Cairngorms National Park and Aberdeenshire.
 - Evidence is being gathered to ensure funding and skills initiatives are targeted where they are most needed.
 - The Careers Collaborative initiative aims to:
 - Raise awareness of future job opportunities
 - Explain career pathways into those roles
 - Support people to upskill and reskill
 - Support is aimed not only at school pupils, but also:
 - Adults already in the workforce
 - People looking to re-enter employment



- The overall goal is to ensure people across all local authorities within the park area understand:
 - Future employment opportunities
 - Training and education routes available
 - Opportunities for retraining, upskilling, and entering work at different life stages
- **Scottish Enterprise**
 - Seeking a new rollout of the Scottish Rural Leadership Programme, with procurement expected to begin immediately and recruitment for a new cohort planned for the summer. The programme has already supported 938 rural leaders across Scotland from a wide range of sectors and business sizes, creating a strong network that businesses and organisations can tap into for connections and collaboration.
 - Scotland will host the Global Agritourism Conference in Aberdeenshire in June (23-25), bringing together representatives from more than 50 countries. The event will include farm, food, and drink tours and is expected to attract over 600 attendees, helping to further raise Scotland's international profile in agritourism. Alongside this, a scholars programme is bringing 35 young people from around the world to Scotland, with organisers currently supporting travel and visa arrangements ahead of what is expected to be a highly valuable and engaging week in Aberdeen.
- **Federation of Small Businesses**
 - Short-term lets appear to have been heavily impacted by this year's rates revaluation, with some seeing increases of up to 100%.
 - These increases are expected to significantly affect businesses operating within the national park.
 - There are inconsistencies between local authorities regarding business rates reliefs and discounts.
 - Some reliefs are applied automatically, while others require businesses to submit applications.
 - A spreadsheet is being compiled to compare what different local authorities offer.
 - Members experiencing issues are being advised to check their local authority website directly for guidance.
 - Businesses should assume they need to apply for all available reliefs rather than expect automatic discounts.



- There are many different business rates relief schemes available (around 20), depending on the type of organisation, such as businesses, charities, or village halls.
- It is important for ratepayers to review their bill carefully and apply for any reliefs or discounts they are eligible for.
- **Cairngorms National Park Authority**
 - The call for sites and ideas for the Local Development Plan (LDP) is currently open and available on the website. People are encouraged to share this opportunity with anyone interested in development, as early submissions are particularly important under the current LDP process.
 - A fire bylaw was introduced in the National Park at the start of last month. Rangers on the ground are seeing a high level of public awareness about the bylaw. Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust have played a leading role in promoting fire safety messaging at the visitor centre using campaign materials.
 - Colin McLean is expected to lead the fire management plan for Glenmore and coordinate with SFRS and FLS. Glenmore was identified as a practical starting point for fire management efforts due to its high visitor numbers, history of fires, and manageable scale.
- **Moray Council (via email):**
 - The Scottish Government's Addressing Depopulation Action Plan focuses on three main areas of support and investment.
 - A successful application was made to improve access to school-age childcare through transport integration and data-driven planning. Core activities include appointing a dedicated school-age childcare project officer to:
 - Evaluate current childcare provision and identify barriers.
 - Lead engagement with stakeholders.
 - Design sustainable childcare models.
 - Support the establishment of centralised childcare facilities, including identifying premises and registering providers.

A key part of the childcare work is assessing transport connectivity and integrating existing services such as school transport, local bus services and Moray Council's m.connect bus service.

- Under the community wealth building agenda, funding has been secured to extend the community wealth building post. This extension will support commissioning background studies to inform preparation of the Regional Socioeconomic Benefit



Plan. The plan will provide a strategic approach to securing socioeconomic benefits from renewable energy proposals.

Next meeting

Thursday 25th of June at 3pm, hybrid meeting on Teams or in-person at Park Authority office, Grantown-on-Spey.



Update from Skills Development Scotland

Development of a Careers Collaborative in the Highland and Aberdeenshire LA areas

Strategic Regional Collaboration and Workforce Planning

The Careers Collaborative in Highland and Aberdeenshire local authorities is a multi-agency initiative responding to significant skills demand driven by, but not specific to, major investment in the energy sector. The collaborative's strategy aims to:

- Deliver inspiring campaigns for young people,
- Develop and deliver experiential career learning relative to areas of economic need,
- Expand provision and uptake of apprenticeships in areas of economic need,
- Support upskilling and reskilling to enable people to take advantage of economic opportunities as they arise.

Highland Council have launched a branded campaign - [*My Highland Future*](#) - and are working to raise awareness of upcoming opportunities across schools and communities. Pilots of work-based learning portals and employer engagement models like "Apprentice for a Day" are underway, with flexible delivery models for learning and training and micro-credentials being explored to meet evolving labour market needs.

Local Delivery and Targeted Programmes

In Aberdeenshire, the Careers Collaborative has secured funding for innovative programmes such as the [*Workwise Training Programme*](#), which delivers virtual work experience modules and employer-led career videos in partnership with Aberdeen City Council and NESCol.

DYW Aberdeenshire continues to strengthen employer-school engagement, workplace placements, and career events, while [*Employment CONNECT*](#) implements a three-year strategy to provide career services and target vulnerable groups.

Both Highland and Aberdeenshire are mapping labour market needs to support an expansion of apprenticeship starts in areas of economic need and developing short, intensive training programmes to support upskilling and reskilling. Regional campaigns are also being designed to attract graduates and skilled workers.



Integrated Support Mechanisms and Next Steps

The collaborative approach is underpinned by mechanisms such as PACE (Partnership Action for Continuing Employment), DYW Regional Groups, and digital tools like [My World of Work](#), which combine in-person and online career information, advice, and guidance (CIAG).

In Highland, a local authority roadmap is being finalised via the [Workforce North Mission](#), with efforts focused on apprenticeships and reskilling initiatives, launching work-based learning portals, and rolling out regional talent attraction campaigns.

The Highland Employability Partnership (which incorporates a broad strategic grouping – HEP overseeing 3 smaller locally based LEPs) and DYW Inverness & Central Highland exemplify the integration of local services under the Scottish Government's *No One Left Behind* framework, ensuring sustainable career opportunities and addressing critical skills gaps through coordinated planning and employer engagement.