

24 JAN 2018



Dear Sir,

Re: Response to the CNPA Local Development Plan 2020: Main Issues Report

This is a disappointing plan which offers nothing new to communities in the Park not designated "strategic".

The forecasts on page 25 of the report say it all. Over the next 25 years and against a small rise in national numbers the population of the Park area is projected to fall by 4%, to age by 23%, and the number of people of working age to fall by 10%. If one assumes that the population of the "strategic" settlements will remain stable or even grow then the fall in the rural communities will be correspondingly greater perhaps even reaching 20% of people of working age.

It is impossible to see how rural communities can survive that sort of fall and we will witness a destructive cycle of falling population resulting in fewer local businesses as customer numbers decline leading to fewer work opportunities leading to further falls in the working population.

This is not the description of a sustainable community, the promotion of which is one of the four headline objectives of the plan. I would also argue that small rural working communities are part of the cultural heritage of this part of upland Scotland which is the stated overriding objective of the Plan (page 5).

The Plan makes no attempt to facilitate the creation of new sectors of employment particularly for the young. In non-strategic communities the plan states that development will be limited to fulfil "local needs" (whatever that means) and largely restricted to agriculture, land management and tourism (Page 13). In other words development will be limited to the opportunities which already exist. Tourism, for the most part, only offers part time seasonal work. Currently most young with full time employment are engaged in agriculture and land management mainly keeping on sporting estates. Of the two only the latter offers a full time pensionable career. Both sectors will come under great financial pressure over the next decade, agriculture from the withdrawal of direct subsidies and sporting estates as a result of increased government regulation and taxation.

It is not difficult to see that opportunities in these sectors are likely to diminish and without something else emerging there will be nothing to hold the young.

What rural communities in the Park need for new employment opportunities to emerge is excellent digital connectivity, whether 4G or superfast broadband. I was astounded that, as far as I could see, this Main Issues Report makes no reference to this critical factor anywhere although it did appear in an earlier Park Plan. Excellent connectivity should be one of the headlines of any current local development plan and it should be one of the factors which is addressed in each of the underlying

sections. So for example under Planning it should be a stated presumption that any planning applications which will improve connectivity will be approved. And if they are refused, probably for reasons of visual impact, then that refusal will automatically open up additional government funding to allow a more expensive but visually acceptable alternative to be built.

Excellent connectivity would allow a range of small businesses to establish themselves and prosper in small rural communities which is the essence of sustainability. Not only does this plan not offer those prospects it appears to discourage this sort of development in non-strategic settlements (Page15) giving the impression that a form of development “apartheid” is planned for the Park in the next 25 years.

It is understood that the Park Authority has a primary responsibility to conserve and enhance the natural heritage of the Park. But it is a fine line between protecting a landscape and suppressing all real economic activity on it.

It should be remembered that the scenery of the Park is a man made landscape, the result of several thousand years of human activity by the communities living here. This plan appears overly prescriptive and to unnecessarily add to the control the Park Authority has over the “look and feel” of the Park. Much more should be left to the local communities to decide what development they want. Setting out to restrict their options from the outset is unhelpful. As an example this report recommends a presumption against the approval of applications to build new hill tracks (Page 57) which is unnecessary given the effectiveness of the current planning process. With this mindset it is impossible to anticipate that an application to build a Ski Centre on a SSSI in the Park would get approval now. This sounds quite extreme and yet that is what happened at the Lecht in 1977 and for forty years it has successfully provided the north east with a lot of fun, the communities of Upper Donside and Glenlivet with both full time and part time employment, and has brought in thousands of visitors who have benefitted other businesses in the area.

Adrian Walker