

Aberdeenshire Council response to Cairngorms National Park Authority draft Economic Action Plan

Aberdeenshire Council welcomes the Park Authority's consultation on its proposed Economic Action Plan ('the Plan'), supporting delivery of the Partnership Plan and covering the period to 2022. The Council supports the focus of the Plan on inclusive and sustainable growth and initiatives to address the challenges outlined in the Rural Development strand of the Partnership Plan. We wish to commend the excellent positive working relationship between the Park Authority and Aberdeenshire Council. Clearly the Council is already involved in many of the objectives and actions set out in the plan and we are keen to work with the Park Authority from the strong foundation of our existing partnership work to ensure greater alignment and impact going forward.

Aberdeenshire Council delivers a comprehensive range of services to and with communities, businesses and visitors to the Park. We have significant contributions to make to the delivery of the Plan:

- As an enabler of economic growth – through our housing development activities, our property portfolio, our planning services and our investment in the road and public transport networks;
- As an investor in economic growth – through our schools and community learning and development services, our investment in tourism through Visit Aberdeenshire, our housing development activities and schemes such as Supporting Aberdeenshire Businesses;
- As an advocate for the Park – brokering investment through initiatives such as Digital Scotland, R100 and the City Region Deal and supporting applications to funding streams such as the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund

The Council's response to the three questions in the plan is provided below. In terms of the structure of the priority themes and actions, we have proposed some minor changes to create what we feel are more logical groups of activity. This results in a reduction from five to four priority themes but we feel that it strengthens the Plan overall.

13 September 2019

Question 1

Strategic context

Aberdeenshire Council agrees with the Park Authority's overall assessment of the strategic context. In terms of climate emergency, the Council recognises the significant impact that recent lobbying of governments has had in accelerating responses to climate change issues. Aberdeenshire Council has already committed to achieving a 44% reduction in its own emissions by 2025 and is the first local authority in Scotland to have a dedicated Carbon Budget and will be considering a report on climate emergency at its Full Council meeting on 26th September. The outcome of that discussion will be shared with the Park Authority if it has a material impact on this consultation response.

On post-Brexit funding, the Council is actively involved (through SLAED and COSLA and through individual representations to the Scottish and UK Governments) in discussions on priorities for any future funding streams and we are committed to continuing to push a strong focus on sustainable development initiatives, the rural economy and funding for sectors that are vital to the Park's economic viability (agriculture, forestry, digital and creative industries and tourism). We would also be keen to work with the Park Authority on any future phases of the City Region Deal model to ensure that investment priorities in the Aberdeenshire part of the Park are identified and included as negotiation priorities.

Finally, on regional economic partnerships the Plan does not mention Opportunity North East. As the principal public-private partnership focussed on economic growth in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire (and including Moray for the food and drink sector) we recommend that this omission is rectified. Opportunity North East is investing its own resources in economic growth and brokering additional investment in sectors including tourism, digital and food and drink, all of which are critical to the Park's future economy.

Question 2
Priority themes and actions

| Priority theme 1 | Building on the economic strengths of the park |
|--|--|
| Actions | Aberdeenshire Council comments |
| <p>Wages – investigate and promote adoption of a living wage scheme for the Cairngorms National Park.</p> | <p>Aberdeenshire Council is supportive of efforts to improve job security and tackle in-work poverty and recognises the role that a living wage scheme can have in contributing to this, particularly in areas where the economy is dominated by lower skilled and lower paid, often seasonal work. We would also suggest consideration of the use of the real living wage for the scheme, as it is higher than the national living wage and applies to all people aged 18+. This could be an important part of wider efforts to retain younger people in the Park area.</p> |
| <p>Tourism – implement the Tourism Action Plan through the Cairngorms Tourism Partnership</p> | <p>Support, Aberdeenshire Council is actively engaged in this partnership.</p> |
| <p>Forestry – pilot a woodland challenge fund scheme to incentivise woodland planting and uptake of Forestry Grant Scheme</p> | <p>Support. CNP’s forest strategy (2018) notes the importance of forestry to the area and to the continuing development of a ‘forest culture’ in the area. The forest strategy’s ‘vision’ refers to the production of high quality timber (to help sustain the 2 major sawmills and several smaller mills in the park) while under strategic objective 8 there is a commitment to encourage innovative use and marketing of forest products (ultimately to displace more energy intensive construction materials such as concrete, brick and steel and fulfil climate change obligations).</p> |
| <p>Rural development frameworks – pilot development of rural development frameworks with estates and communities to provide long-term planning for land use, business development and housing across estates</p> | <p>Aberdeenshire Council is supportive of economic development in the Park provided it complements the retention and protection of the natural and built environment. In terms of housing, we would encourage the development of smaller scale housing schemes that can help deliver houses for locals and retain a younger working population. Essential needs housing could be expanded to go beyond the normal primary based industries to encourage small scale employment in rural areas.</p> |
| <p>Agriculture – build the case for a regionalised approach to future support for land management in the Cairngorms</p> | <p>Support. The Plan should also commit to helping the farming/land-based sector to diversify, become more market-facing and less subsidy-dependent. Moreover, the processing sector plays a critical role in providing an outlet/market for primary agricultural production (only too apparent when processing capacity is lost). The Plan should work towards the creation of an</p> |

| | |
|---|--|
| | enabling business environment to sustain and develop local processing capacity and enhance the Park's contribution to the Scottish Government's Ambition 2030 for the food and drink sector. |
| Cairngorm Mountain – develop a long-term masterplan and investment package for Cairngorm Mountain as part of the Cairngorm and Glenmore Strategy | Support, propose similar masterplan and investment package development for Glenshee (see below). |
| Glenshee and the Lecht – develop plans to invest in and diversify these sites to sustain local employment and enhance the visitor experience | Aberdeenshire Council is actively engaged with the Glenshee Ski Centre on its plans to anchor winter sports at the site and to diversify to create a genuine year-round visitor destination. We propose that a masterplanning and investment funding exercise for Glenshee (by 2022) should be a priority and Aberdeenshire Council may be willing to contribute some seed funding to support such an exercise. |
| Economic and social data – work to improve the availability and use of economic and social data on the Park | Aberdeenshire Council will positively contribute to any joint working arrangement that can improve the economic and social data on the Park and its application to support future investments and strategies. |
| Outdoor activity sector – continue to develop an approach to the sector that optimises economic potential whilst balancing environmental and conservation priorities. | Aberdeenshire Council is supportive of the work being done to manage sustainable growth in the outdoor activity sector, recognising the importance of shooting, fishing, mountaineering, hill-walking, cycling and skiing to the local economy. |

| Priority theme 2 | Business and enterprise |
|---|---|
| Actions | Aberdeenshire Council comments |
| Attracting talent and investment – promote work/lifestyle benefits of the Cairngorms National Park through development of website content, eg Talent Scotland | Aberdeenshire Council would be keen to work on the investment attraction aspect with the Park Authority and Invest Aberdeen, the inward investment hub for the City Region. There are opportunities to promote both investment propositions and the work/lifestyle benefits of the Park through Invest Aberdeen activity. We would also be keen to see the CNPA utilise the new 'Abzolutely' marketing material that has been created for the region. |
| Supporting business – investigate potential for new models of business support including community-led and social enterprise models | Business Gateway is the common business support programme across the Park. Aberdeenshire Council would be keen to see a more active partnership between the Park Authority and Business Gateway to ensure that the needs of businesses within the Park are met and that opportunities for future inclusive growth are optimised. |
| Circular economy - develop a business-led initiative to promote the circular economy of the National Park | The Circular North East programme (hosted by the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce) provides advice and access to |

| | |
|--|---|
| | grants to companies across Aberdeenshire. We would be keen to see links developed between this project and the Park Authority. Aberdeenshire Council's Sustainability Committee has approved a commitment to the circular economy and we would be interested to discuss further roll-out of this across public and third sector partners in the Park area. |
| Mitigation and adaptation to climate change – support businesses to reduce their emissions and adapt to future climate issues in their business and supply chains. | Aberdeenshire Council would be interested in the co-design and delivery of business-facing climate change programmes, possibly through the Business Gateway programme. |
| Developing an entrepreneurial culture-develop a programme of events to stimulate a positive and creative approach to doing business within the Park in all sectors | See note above on Business Gateway. Aberdeenshire Council manages the Business Gateway contract for the area and could work with the provider and the Park Authority on discrete activity for businesses in the Park area. In addition, we are working on pilot initiatives such as LINA (Library Innovation Network Aberdeenshire) with Robert Gordon University. This is a LEADER funded project to bring innovation and entrepreneurship support to local communities that could, in the future, be rolled out to other locations. |
| Social enterprise training – review arrangements to follow on from Social Enterprise Academy training project | See note above on Business Gateway. |
| Work with 'gateway' communities to ensure they can maximise the benefits of their proximity to the Park area. | We would be supportive of efforts to engage 'gateway' towns and villages with Park Authority and partnership activities, recognising the important role they play as service hubs and links to tourism and wider economic opportunities beyond the Park's boundary. |

| Priority theme 3 | Community development, training and skills |
|--|--|
| Actions | Aberdeenshire Council comments |
| Digital training – deliver training for tourism sector | We would be supportive of efforts to deliver more and enhanced digital skills training to businesses across all sectors, recognising that online trading is one way that businesses in more remote locations can continue to compete with those based in urban areas. Aberdeenshire Council could secure delivery of digital training for businesses in key settlements within the Park through the Digital Boost programme, and other local authority partners to the Park Authority should be able to do the same. In addition, a priority in Aberdeenshire Council's agreement with Visit Aberdeenshire is for Visit Aberdeenshire to deliver training in digital skills to tourism |

| | |
|--|---|
| | businesses. We would be keen to see this done collaboratively with the Park Authority. |
| Skills – continued delivery of regional Skills Investment Plans throughout the Park | Support. We would encourage the Regional Skills Planning Leads (Skills Development Scotland) covering the Park area to work together on delivering skills programmes that are specifically designed for the National Park. We would be interested in working with the Park Authority on an employability strategy for the area, addressing the issues that are unique to the Park and enabling sustainable employment opportunities in and around key settlements. |
| Invest in community-led development – secure continuity of investment in local enterprise development, including farm diversification to follow on from current LEADER programme | We are keen to secure a legacy from the current LEADER programmes operating in Aberdeenshire and would take the same view with the Cairngorms LEADER programme. We are working with the North and South LAGs in Aberdeenshire to define and develop a future role for the groups, which will provide a strong platform for bidding for any future UK or Scottish Government rural CLD funding rounds. |
| Young people – develop a programme of action with young people to maximise opportunities and address barriers to living and working in the Park | Aberdeenshire Council is very supportive of this action and would like to work with the Park Authority and other public and third sector partners on initiatives that support young people living and working in the Park in the future. The resilience and viability of Park communities is very much a focus of the Council. For example, we are soon to start piloting a job club for young people in Ballater and we are also enabling affordable housing delivery in the town. We would like to work with the Park Authority on building the investment case for schemes such as this into the future. |

| Priority theme 4 | Infrastructure and capital investment |
|---|--|
| Actions | Aberdeenshire Council comments |
| Housing delivery – undertake a review of vacant and derelict land and property, stalled development sites and impacts of short-term lets, to identify interventions and opportunities for public interest development | Support, and bring forward sites that are in Aberdeenshire Council’s ownership when viable to do so. |
| Community-led housing delivery – promote new community-led approaches to delivery of housing in communities across the Park using Rural Housing Fund | Support. |
| Business-led housing delivery – pilot and encourage business-led housing projects for employees | Support. |
| Digital connectivity – plan and deliver the Scottish Government ‘Reaching 100’ | Aberdeenshire Council is working closely with the Scottish Government on its plans for the |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>programme to deliver superfast broadband to all premises and enhance mobile connectivity</p> | <p>R100 programme and is actively involved with the current procurement exercise. We continue to make the case for public sector subsidy to be targeted at the areas that are most difficult to reach. We are exploring mixed public sector / commercial investment models in other parts of Aberdeenshire but these may prove difficult to replicate in the Park area due to the physical constraints and the dispersed nature of much of the population.</p> <p>We are also working with the Scottish and UK Governments and other local authority partners on potential investments in 5G mobile phone connectivity.</p> |
| <p>Capital investment priorities – continue to deliver on the priorities as set out in the Park Partnership Plan</p> | <p>Support. We are keen to see the project to develop the new path from Braemar to Old Bridge of Dee delivered.</p> |

Question 3

Delivery and monitoring

Aberdeenshire Council supports the high-level delivery and monitoring arrangements as proposed and will continue to engage in Park Authority delivery and governance activities where appropriate to do so. We welcome the proposal to co-ordinate delivery through existing structures rather than creating new groups or governance tiers.

We would welcome further details on the types of performance indicators and outcomes the Park Authority proposes to use to measure the impact of the Economic Action Plan. For example, will measures such as the number of businesses and employees on the park area be captured? A business survey in the Park area could be a useful addition and would generate significant baseline data and could be repeated in alternate years to check on progress.