

Your draft Action Plan is comprehensive, easy to follow, and contains a range of well thought through, simple but powerful actions.

I make the following observations:

1. Demographic change – implications for the workforce

While the future is a closed book, it does appear highly likely that smaller businesses in the Park area are going to find recruiting staff from overseas nigh impossible in future. Given the Highlands and Scotland's low unemployment rates and relative dependency on foreign labour, this is going to threaten the viability of some businesses and make life extremely tough for many. It is a major issue for the Park

It is therefore essential that absolute priority is given to making the Park as attractive a place to work, live and play as possible for home-grown young people, and young people and families from elsewhere in the UK.

Top of the list is clearly having the right type of housing in the right places at the right prices and ensuring that economically active people can access it on a residential basis.

Remoteness barriers also remain a threat, and fit-for-purpose digital connectivity together with excellent transport links – private and public; within the Park area and between the Park and the outside world – are essential.

2. The importance of towns and villages to the Park

I would like to take this opportunity to draw your attention to work undertaken by FSB Scotland.

In February 2017, FSB Scotland published a report on Scotland's Entrepreneurial Towns (with populations exceeding 999). Newtonmore was highlighted as the second most entrepreneurial town in Scotland and Kingussie the 15th. Other towns in the Park also appeared well above the average. Perhaps unsurprisingly, analysis revealed that highly entrepreneurial towns are characterised by small populations, higher home ownership, access to cars, low levels of deprivation, low levels of unemployment, higher socioeconomic status and higher educational attainment levels, all of which are typified by Park towns and villages.

In September 2019 FSB Scotland published a new report – Transforming Towns: Delivering a sustainable future for local places. While welcoming the Scottish Government's Scottish Town Centre Fund (something created as a direct result of FSB lobbying) the report states that one-off investments are not enough. If we want to reverse declines and rebalance populations, we must make our towns attractive places to live, work and play for people of all ages. Our report calls for new, innovative solutions that help towns diversify.

Some of these Scottish solutions are more relevant than others to the Park, given the dominance of tourism, however the principles remain true. We need less reliance on traditional retail to fill vacant units and more emphasis on other forms of commercial use, such as offices, co-working spaces and pop-up units. People living in town centres create footfall and atmosphere, so why not more housing too?

Above all, businesses and economic prosperity are synonymous and businesses must lie at the heart of strategies that unite social and economic needs. One Highland town that really stands out is Alness, which has risen from the depths of economic and social despair 25 years ago into a really positive and vibrant town today. It won the Great British High Street Award last year and has been shortlisted again this year. Success has been achieved through a small group of

powerful individuals – business owners – getting together to make change happen. It's one to watch.

The FSB Scotland report also called for the creation of a new Scottish Government commission to tackle the blight of empty properties; for the presence of anchor institutions like local authority offices, hospitals and colleges to be maintained; and for banks to deliver on their shared hubs promises.

Attention must also be given to parking charges and business rates, and, of course, to climate change; and we also want help for independent traders to better utilise digital technologies to enable them to compete online - individually and collectively.

Most important of all, both the Scottish and UK Governments must make long-term commitments to Scotland's towns. We want them jointly to invest £90 million annually.

3. **Climate change – taking action now**

The "Climate Emergency" is going to impact on businesses in the Park, as it is on society as a whole. While the life of your new Action Plan is short, the time is right to get together with local businesses and the public sector to discuss how opportunities can be grasped and, sadly more likely, threats overcome. Planning can't come too early.

Perhaps action points on this issue could be included in the Plan?

I hope that this helps and please don't hesitate to get in touch if you have any queries.

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