

RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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14 October, 2002

PROPOSALS FOR THE CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK

As you will be aware, the Rural Development Committee has held several evidence sessions on these proposals. The Committee began its evidence taking by hearing from you and from Scottish Executive officials in Edinburgh, and also held a very well attended meeting in Kingussie on 11 October, where it heard from a wide range of local and national interests.

You indicated in your evidence on 1 October that you would take on board the views of the Committee provided that this information was available as soon as possible after our meeting in Kingussie. I am therefore writing to convey to you the views of members on the draft designation order. I am grateful for your assurances that the views of the Committee will be given serious consideration, and that the views outlined in this letter will be given the same status as a formal Committee report. I am sure that you will find the full report of the meeting in Kingussie of great interest, and will therefore forward the *Official Report* and the transcript of the informal public session to you under separate cover when they become available tomorrow.

The Consultation Process

The Committee notes the enormous resources that SNH put into consulting the local community before drawing up its recommendations for the Park, and the widespread support for that consultation process. The Committee also notes that SNH provided the full rationale behind the recommendations made so that the local community could follow the reasoning behind its decisions. By contrast, the Committee heard a number of submissions that the local community felt disenfranchised by the consultation process that the Scottish Executive conducted. **The Committee is disappointed that the Executive did not provide a fuller explanation of the rationale behind the draft designation order. The Committee believes that that the Executive should have provided a full explanation of why the draft designation order differs from the proposals put forward by SNH, especially in respect of the boundary of the proposed park.** The Committee also notes concerns expressed by local groups regarding the timing of the consultation, and the timeframe for the implementation of the Park, which many local groups felt was too rushed, with the result that they felt excluded from the process.

The Proposed Boundary of the Park

The Committee heard concerns from a number of groups and individuals regarding the proposed boundary. A number of specific points were put forward, and these are

contained within the *Official Report* of the meeting. In general, communities were of the view that the proposed boundary was illogical and had not been considered sufficiently. Concerns were expressed that the boundary cut through a number of communities and natural features, whilst in other cases it excluded some areas that were felt to have a strong case for inclusion. There appeared to the Committee to be almost unanimous dissatisfaction with the proposed boundary, along with a degree of bewilderment due to the fact that the Executive had not provided clear and transparent reasons for its departure from the recommendations of SNH. The Committee believes that the approach of SNH to developing the boundary was logical, transparent and took on board the views of the community.

The Committee therefore unanimously recommends that the Scottish Executive adopt the boundary proposed by SNH, with one exception, which relates to the Parish of Laggan. The Committee heard evidence on Petition PE 555 from the Laggan Farmers Action Group, which called for the Parish to be included within the Park and the Committee unanimously agreed to endorse this petition. It is understood that the boundary proposed by SNH did not include the entire area around Laggan. **The Committee therefore recommends that the Executive adopt the SNH boundary, but with the inclusion of the whole Parish of Laggan, including the headwaters of the Spey.**

Planning Powers

The Committee heard a wide range of evidence on the subject of planning powers for the Park, both from local communities, and from local authorities who currently have responsibility for planning issues in the area. The Committee notes that these local authorities have built up expertise in planning issues, and are developing a track record of working in partnership with local communities. The Committee believes that it is crucial to retain the involvement of local authorities in planning issues, and to encourage the joint working approach. **The majority of the Committee(1) therefore recommends that the local authorities and the national park authority should jointly produce the structure plan for the park.** Such an approach will ensure that the local authority plans will be consistent with the structure plan for the park area. **The majority of the Committee further recommends that local authorities should retain overall responsibility for development planning and development control, but that they should be encouraged to work closely with the national park authority in this respect. The national park authority should also retain the ability to call in applications that are of general significance to the aims of the park.**

The Committee is conscious that many people believe that the national park authority should be the planning authority for the area. (Over 80% of the submissions to the latest consultation thought that the planning powers for the park should be the same as the arrangements for the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park). However, the Committee is also aware of local concerns that transferring these powers to the park authority could act as a disincentive for development in the area. **The Committee therefore recommends that these planning arrangements should be monitored and that they should be reviewed after a period of 7 years, at which point the views of the community should be taken on board, with a view to making any necessary changes.**

On the subject of planning powers, the Committee heard a great deal of evidence regarding the need for affordable social housing in the area. The Committee believes that the provision of affordable social housing should be a priority both for local authorities and the national park authority, and looks to the Executive to provide suitable guidance and support to the planning authorities to ensure that that occurs.

(1) Mike Rumbles MSP dissented from this position.

The Committee also notes the concerns of farmers within the park, and looks to the Executive to develop the appropriate land management schemes to ensure that farmers can capitalise on the opportunities afforded by the creation of the park.

The evidence that the Committee heard in Kingussie confirmed to us that the success of the park is dependent upon the national park authority securing the trust of local residents and business interests. It is crucial that the park authority acts to enable local interests to achieve the aims and objectives developed by local communities rather than imposing its views upon them. The Committee also heard evidence that it is essential that the park authority works to complement local businesses rather than acting in competition with them. **The Committee urges the Executive to take on board the views of the local community and to work as closely with them as possible in the creation and implementation of the Cairngorms National Park and the national park authority.**

I hope that the views of the Committee will be of assistance to you in making decisions regarding the final draft designation order. The Committee hopes to see these views reflected in the order when it is laid before Parliament and looks forward to further scrutinising the order in due course.

Yours sincerely

ALEX FERGUSSON
Convener
Rural Development Committee