PROPOSALS FOR THE CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK

Thank you for your letter of 14 October setting out the views of the Rural Development Committee on the proposals contained in the draft Cairngorms National Park Designation Order. As you know, I value the Committee’s views and I am grateful that you were able to submit these so promptly, following your meeting in Kingussie.

I note that the Committee has commented on the Executive’s consultation process, comparing it with that conducted by Scottish Natural Heritage. The Committee also expressed disappointment that the Executive did not provide a full explanation of the reasons for the differences between SNH’s proposals and those contained in the draft Designation Order. As your letter implies, the Executive’s consultation process was less extensive than the SNH process. It should be remembered, however, that we were building on a great deal of earlier evidence of the range of views held on this issue in the excellent work of SNH and others. We sent out around 2,200 copies of the consultation document, participated in a number of meetings in the area, funded local meetings and events when local facilitators explained the Executive’s proposals and made available supplementary briefing material to aid discussion at these events. We also met a number of interested groups and individuals to hear their views and concerns on our proposals. The consultation exercise effectively covered a 14 week period and attracted almost 500 responses.

On boundaries, I note that the Committee has recommended that the Executive should adopt the boundary proposed by SNH, together with the whole parish of Laggan including the head waters of the River Spey. We have noted this recommendation. The proposal contained in the draft Designation Order was based on the mountain core of the central Cairngorms, the most closely linked adjacent straths and the Grantown-on-Spey area. In essence, these were the areas which SNH felt had a very strong case for inclusion. The park area proposed by SNH, however, also included areas which they felt represented a strong case. In the light of the Committee’s recommendation and
also of the views submitted by respondents to the Executive’s consultation, I recognise that there is a case for extending the Park area, not only to remove the anomalies which had arisen through the division of certain communities e.g. at Cromdale, and to follow watersheds more closely, but also to include significantly larger areas. In that latter context, we have looked again at the areas which attracted SNH’s “strong” classification. Bearing in mind the need to establish a National Park which will have a coherent identity and which will make a difference, I recognise that there are strong arguments in favour of including in the Park the heads of the Angus Glens and much of the Glenlivet Estate and the Strathdon/Glen Buchat area. There is also clearly a substantial body of opinion in favour of including a significant part of the Laggan area, including Strathmashie, Drumochter Pass and Dalwhinnie, within the Park boundary. There appears too to be a strong case for the southern boundary to incorporate Glen Tromie and the Gaick Forest area at the Highland Council boundary. The draft Order we have now tabled reflects that situation.

On planning powers, I note that the Committee has recommended by a majority that local authorities and the National Park Authority should jointly produce the structure plan for the Park. However, the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 does not make provision for a designation order to set out that local authorities and National Park Authorities should be joint planning authorities. You will also be aware that one of the conclusions of our Review of Strategic Planning is that we will remove the Scotland-wide requirement for structure plans and that 2-tier plans will only be required for the 4 major city regions. This will require a Planning Bill which we will introduce when time and resources permit. I also note your majority view that local authorities should retain overall responsibility for development planning – by which I take you to mean the preparation of local plans – and development control, with the National Park Authority retaining the ability to call in applications which are of general significance to the aims of the Park. I am impressed by the general thrust of these arguments, but am inclined to think that there are at least equally strong arguments to the effect that responsibility for preparing local plans should rest with the National Park Authority in order to provide a broad and Park-wide perspective and consistency in their policy approach. In exercising such a local planning function, the Park Authority would of course have to undertake wide consultation with all stakeholders, including in particular the relevant local authorities.

It will be important to allow the National Park Authority to concentrate on the work of preparing a local plan and on its other core responsibilities, such as land management. I believe, however, that the proposal to allow the Park Authority to call in for its own determination, planning applications of general significance to the National Park aims, will minimise the risk that the national importance of the Park is prejudiced by local considerations. Again, the draft Order now tabled reflects that position.

I note that the Committee has also recommended that the operation of the planning arrangements should be monitored and reviewed after a period of seven years. While this is not a matter for the Designation Order, I readily recognise the merit in the Committee’s proposal and, indeed, intend that a review of the planning arrangements would be a feature of the Quinquennial Reviews to which the National Park Authority, in common with all other NDPBs, will be subject.

I also note the Committee’s comments on affordable social housing and the need to develop appropriate land management schemes. Again, these are not matters for the Designation Order, but we shall consider in due course how guidance might be issued to encourage the National Park Authority to become involved in this area. On land management schemes, we already have in hand a research project, the aim of which is to identify ways in which new directions in land management in National Parks could generate a range of environmental, social and economic benefits.
The Committee has also commented on the need to involve the local community in the establishment of the Cairngorms National Park. I recognise the value of such a course and we shall seek to involve the community where appropriate.

As I have said, I am grateful to the Committee for its speedy response to the proposals in the draft Designation Order. I look forward to its consideration of the finalised draft Order now laid before Parliament.

ALLAN WILSON