

Industrial Strategies for Rural Areas



In a key speech at Ashington in September 2019¹, Andrew Haldane, the Chair of the Industrial Strategy Council, suggested that the key narratives on the economy could be grouped into six categories – the “Big Six”. While recognising that this was necessarily a simplification, he suggested they gave a sense of the key themes. His Big Six were:

- Transport and connectivity,
- Schools and education,
- Housing and shelter,
- High streets and social spaces,
- Good work and fair pay, and
- Money and finance

He noted that the Big Six span a range of factors, economic, financial and social and concluded that “the most striking feature of the Big Six is that they almost always are working well – individually and collectively – in thriving towns and cities, but are typically working poorly (if at all) in towns and cities that are struggling.”

Haldane’s comment focusses on towns and cities. Even so, it is interesting that the environment and the green economy do not feature in this list, especially since climate and ecological emergencies, with their linked challenges and opportunities, are increasingly seen as “cross cutting” considerations which should run through all aspects of policy and planning, and which could contribute a new dimension to the complementary relationship of rural and urban areas.

For the rural areas of a county such as Dorset “the environment is our greatest economic asset”². Dorset’s Environmental Economy was estimated in 2016 to be worth between £0.8bn and £4.5bn per year with a central value of around £1.5bn. This suggested value was an underestimate, even in 2016, not least as the study’s economic assessment reflected a main focus on selected areas, notably the Dorset AONB and Dorset’s Jurassic Coast. As others have identified,³ the attributes and strengths of rural Dorset have been underestimated and under-valued. The climate and ecological emergencies, recognised by national and local government, now place an especial premium on the value of natural capital and the ecosystem services this provides. Such services include healthy and productive soils, good food, clean water systems, fresh air, trees and plants and are vital to a thriving, healthy and sustainable society and economy, as well as to tackling climate change and ecological decline.

The value of Dorset’s environment, for the local economy and the nation, needs to be better evaluated and appreciated. The attraction and amenity value of the area alone explain why many people live and work in rural Dorset, live in the rural area and work in the neighbouring conurbation of Bournemouth/Christchurch/Poole (BCP), retire here and visit the area. The quality of an environment and its cultural heritage can underpin people’s decision on where to locate their business – especially where high quality broadband is available. It can attract mobile investment and young families and entrepreneurs who value a work/life balance. It

¹ <https://industrialstrategycouncil.org/ashington-speech-andy-haldane>

² Ash Futures, Dorset’s Environmental Economy, DCC, 2016

³ eg Jo Witherden, A National Park for Dorset, Considering the Case, Dorset CPRE 2019

can assist businesses in rural and neighbouring urban areas attract staff who also value what a quality environment can offer. It can give an area a sense of place, pride and connectedness and contribute to the health and well-being of communities and visitors.

An industrial strategy which recognises and builds on the strengths of both its rural and urban areas would be in line with the findings of the Rural Services Network, the House of Lords Foster Report and more specific analysis such as that of the South West Rural Productivity Commission.

Rural areas of counties such as Dorset can capitalise on their own unique strengths and complementarity with urban centres. They can, for example, draw on their high quality natural environment and heritage to attract businesses in creative industries such as the arts, digital media and virtual reality, to develop expertise and attract investment in high productivity and specialised manufacturing, farming and foods, and stimulate business interest and growth more generally in the green economy. Indeed, Dorset's agricultural college aims to support new carbon-neutral ways of farming. Bournemouth's universities have well-respected strengths, including in the creative industries and environmental and ecological studies and research, and can reinforce economic opportunities in these areas. Dorset's above-average age profile, while it contributes to social care costs, could stimulate new approaches in promoting health and wellbeing, and in quality care, with returns on investment for society and the economy.

While centres of advanced engineering or manufacture, biotechnology, defence and aerospace, and financial services are more often based around urban clusters of similar businesses, research facilities and skills, rural areas can develop specialist centres in these sectors and contribute to the supply chains for neighbouring urban clusters.

But while Dorset's environment and ecology are a strength, they are also at risk, and, like those elsewhere, have been deteriorating for decades⁴. A climate and ecological emergency has been declared by the Dorset Council. Recent years have seen growing pressure to better safeguard the special qualities of the area's environment, wildlife and cultural heritage through upgrading the Dorset AONB to a National Park that would bring the resources, expertise and capacity to meet current and future challenges. This could also embrace areas such as the currently largely unprotected "Egdon Heath" of Thomas Hardy's Wessex.

Such a National Park would not only benefit the environment, ecology and cultural heritage, but also Dorset's communities and economy. Despite varied initiatives, Dorset continues to face the challenges of a relatively low wage, low productivity rural economy, and an over-dependence on seasonal tourism. A National Park has national and international brand recognition and would help put Dorset more on the map, attract investment, jobs and skills and promote Dorset based products and services.⁵ On the basis of evidence from the South Downs National Park, a Dorset National Park should lengthen the visitor season, spread the economic benefits, and help develop higher value eco, cultural, heritage and dark sky "astro" tourism. In doing so, it can strengthen the skill base of the visitor economy and related businesses and so help them move to a higher value-added model.

A National Park would also help to address the challenges of significant deprivation which face some Dorset communities, especially Weymouth and Portland. It would help address Dorset's shortage of genuinely affordable homes for local people. Currently high house prices and a shortage of relevant homes and work-space make it difficult to keep and attract

⁴ <https://www.dorsetnationalpark.com/post/climate-and-environmental-emergency>

⁵ See eg. <https://www.dorsetnationalpark.com/post/economic-benefits-of-a-np>

young people, families and enterprising businesses. A Dorset National Park would work with councils and local people to help address these issues, strengthen economic and social wellbeing, and secure a thriving and sustainable future for communities. National Parks have a duty to foster the economic and social wellbeing of communities, and to respond proactively to local housing needs.

Growing the value of the area's natural capital and ecosystem services (including high quality foods, clean water systems, and carbon capture in healthy soils and woodlands) and greener energy, together with their associated high-quality human and technological capabilities and investment, offers a sustainable and green economic future. Communities and businesses would benefit from a National Park which would invest in and grow Dorset's natural capital and work with the Dorset Council and others to develop policies for appropriate, sustainable development (including affordable housing), sustainable transport and energy, while better conserving and enhancing our unique environment. A National Park would enable Dorset to capitalise on, without compromising, its environment while partnering with the Dorset LEP and the Dorset Council to deliver a thriving economic future. The vision of the Dorset LEP reflects this focus on Dorset's environmental possibilities. As the Chair has said, "We will focus on clean and sustainable growth, utilising our outstanding natural assets and thriving blue and green economies." The basis for a productive and constructive partnership clearly exists.

Dorset is an example of an area that has two, complementary parts: the largely rural Dorset "county" and the adjacent BCP conurbation. Its industrial strategy can reflect and respect these complementary characters and strengths. In the predominantly rural Dorset the environment, biodiversity and farmed landscapes, the cultural economy and heritage are important strengths and, if appropriately and sustainably managed and developed in partnership with a National Park, can be the basis for a vibrant green and blue economy. An investment in the internationally recognised landscapes, biodiversity and cultural heritage of Dorset would be an investment in what makes Dorset special.

The Government has a manifesto commitment to create new National Parks, the Government's Glover Review of Designated Areas recommends that Dorset be seriously considered for National Park status, and Dorset is widely considered to be the outstanding candidate to be England's next National Park.

The basis exists for a strong and positive partnership between a Dorset National Park, the Dorset Council, the LEP and Dorset's communities and other stakeholders, which would benefit all of Dorset and offer a successful, sustainable long-term future.

*DNP Team
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www.dorsetnationalpark.com

Dorset & East Devon National Park CIC. Co Number: 10563714
Registered Address: Badgers Keep, Barnhill Road, Wareham, Dorset BH20 5BG