

INTRODUCTION



The Highland Council has a duty under the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 to prepare and keep up-to-date Development Plans i.e. Structure and Local Plans for their area. In February 1998, the Council announced its Intention to Prepare a new Local Plan covering Caithness. This will replace the existing Local Plans:

- East Caithness (Adopted in May 1987); and
- West Caithness (Adopted in May 1987), including Alteration No.1, Pennyland (January 1990) and Alteration No.2, Thurso Housing (November 1996).

Purpose of the Plan

An important purpose of the Local Plan is to take forward the Structure Plan Strategy and translate its policies into more detailed land allocations.

The Local Plan is also of strategic importance as the spatial interpretation of the Caithness Strategy or Vision agreed by the Caithness Partnership. As such, it will co-ordinate the detailed development and use of land in the County over the next 5 to 10 years. The main functions of the Local Plan are therefore to:

- allocate sites for new homes, industry and business, shops, schools and leisure purposes to guide developers and assist with determination of planning applications,
- integrate the planning of these uses with proposals for public services and infrastructure networks;
- protect important natural and man-made heritage features and identify the scope for local environmental improvements, and
- provide local people and other stakeholders with the opportunity to participate in the planning of each community.

Both the Planning Act and National Planning Policy Guidelines require that decisions on planning applications be made in accordance with the provisions of the approved Development Plan (Structure Plan and Local Plan) unless material considerations indicate otherwise. This is intended to give greater certainty to residents, community groups, developers, business investors and infrastructure providers.

Format of the Plan

A Local Plan consists of a Written Statement, Proposals Maps, Inset Maps, and a separate General Policies Annex. The Written Statement contains three types of guidance on the Council's views on land use issues:

Policies express the Council's attitude towards the use of land within the Plan area.

Proposals are actions to be carried out by public or private bodies, normally within the Plan period, which promote development. However, any dates and costs shown against proposals are liable to change as programmes and the availability of resources are reviewed annually.

Recommendations relate to matters outwith the Council's control, where the Council wishes to make its views known to the appropriate body.

How to Use the Plan

For greater clarification of background and strategic matters the Local Plan should be used in conjunction with the Structure Plan.

Chapters 1 and 2 set out the Council's strategic objectives for Caithness over the next 10 years and beyond. The detailed provisions of the Plan are contained in the remaining chapters, where the paragraph numbers of the Written Statement link the text to the Proposals and Inset Maps.

There are two main approaches to using the Plan.

1. Using the Written Statement first you can refer to the Index or Contents Pages to look up the village or area you are interested in. For example, for Lybster you would be directed to page 43 in Chapter 9 of the Written Statement where that village is number 9. That also means that the village is covered by Main Village Inset Map 9 of the accompanying Maps. Using both the Written Statement and the Map at the same time you can find out what the Plan says about that village.

2. Using the Proposals Maps you can, for example, find out what the Plan is saying about the area in which your house is located. If you live in one of the ten main settlements turn to the appropriate Inset Map, which are at a scale on which to trace your property. Outwith these villages you should refer to main Proposals Map and rural settlement Insets. These maps tend to be of a smaller scale so that individual properties are more difficult to identify. However, the policies applying tend to cover much larger geographical areas.

On the maps, a set of General Policies are applied across the Local Plan area where indicated. These are referred to as Primary Policies and Settlement Policies. An explanation of these policies, including detailed definitions and background, is contained in the separate General Policies Annex.

More specific sites, proposals and policies have their own reference numbers.

Proposals and Inset Maps

These correspond with paragraph numbers in the Written Statement.

In the Written Statement policies, proposals and development opportunities are shown *in bold italic type*. Cross references to other policies in this Plan or its Appendices and General Policies Annex are bracketed () and the Structure Plan bracketed [].

Appendices I to IX, unique to Caithness are contained at the back of this Written Statement.

Global and National Obligations

In addition to the Highland Structure Plan, approved by the Secretary of State in November 1990, the Local Plan takes account of:

- the Deposit Draft Structure Plan (December 1999);
- emerging Local Agenda 21 considerations that underpin the application of sustainable development principles;
- European Commission Directives; and
- National Planning Policy Guidelines.

Sustainable Development

Development Plans are required to embrace sustainability principles. In the Structure Plan these are:

- supporting the viability of communities;
- developing a prosperous and vibrant local economy; and
- safeguarding and enhancing the natural and built environment.

Paragraph 1.4.4 of the Structure Plan identifies fifteen sustainable objectives that conform to the principles of sustainable development.

In Caithness the need to safeguard the natural environment is widely acknowledged, particularly if the area is to remain attractive to visitors and potential residents. The need to maintain the livelihoods of local people, the quality of local services and the vitality of their communities must equally be recognised. Having reasonable access to a range of job opportunities, housing, social and community facilities is fundamental to providing a quality living environment and sustainable communities, as well as improving local self sufficiency.

Development must also be sustainable by:

- becoming more energy efficient and reducing the need to travel;
- reducing the impact of activities on cultural and natural heritage and the wider environment;
- re-using derelict and vacant property;
- reducing pollution and improving water quality; and
- supporting the use of sustainable energy sources, including wind and hydro power.

While reducing journey times and car dependence is a key objective of national transport policy, this is difficult to implement in rural areas, particularly as facilities continue to be centralised and the minimum populations needed to support them increase. Improvements to public and other forms of transport deserve support. However, the Council recognises that having the use of a car is at present a pre-condition of employment and access to social facilities for the majority of the rural population.



Structure Plan

The Highland Structure Plan, approved by the Scottish Ministers in March 2001, sets out the strategic planning policy framework for the Highlands. This highlights the following key issues for Caithness:

- arresting population decline;
- creation of jobs;
- development of Thurso and Wick to be complementary to each other;
- the future of Dounreay;
- attraction of oil-related and other specialised engineering industry;
- transport links with the rest of Highland and Scotland;
- stimulation of tourist business (nature conservation; archaeology);
- support for agriculture and associated enterprises;
- housing in the countryside;
- countryside around towns framework for Thurso / Wick axis; and
- stimulation of flagstone and other mineral extraction.

A full list of Structure Plan policies is contained in the General Policies Annex to this Local Plan. These provide the strategic context for the Local Plan, as do the seven Strategic Themes outlined in section 1.5 of the Structure Plan. The Local Plan is also of strategic importance as the spatial interpretation of the Caithness Strategy or Vision agreed by the Caithness Partnership and as the document that will co-ordinate the detailed development and use of land in the County over the next 5 to 10 years.

Preparation and Consultation Timetable

COMMENCEMENT

- 18 & 20 March 1998 – Notice of Intention to Prepare.
- March to May 1998 – Initial consultations/community workshops.

CONSULTATIVE DRAFT

- 17 March to 12 May 2000 – Consultation period.
- 25 & 27 September 2000 – Representations reported to Committees and changes and publication of Deposit Draft Plan agreed.

DEPOSIT DRAFT

- 29 Nov. 2000 to 12 Jan. 2001 - Deposit period.
- 19 & 28 March 2001 - Objections and Representations reported to Committees and Modifications agreed.

PRE - INQUIRY MODIFICATIONS

- 4 May to 16 June 2001 - Deposit period on Deposit Draft with Modifications (1).
- 30 July 2001 - Objections and Representations reported to Committees and agreed Modifications referred to PLI Reporter.

PUBLIC LOCAL INQUIRY

- August to October 2001 - Unresolved Objections dealt with by Reporter including at the Inquiry 11 & 12 September.
- 17 December 2001 - Reporter's recommendations to Caithness Committee.
- 31 January 2002 - Highland Planning, Development, Europe & Tourism Committee agree further Modifications arising from PLI process.

POST - INQUIRY MODIFICATIONS

- 15 February to 29 March 2002 - Deposit period Deposit Draft with Modifications (2).
- 7 & 29 May 2002 - Objections and Representations reported to Committees and Intention to Adopt agreed without further Modifications.

INTENTION TO ADOPT

- 26 July 2002 - Intention to Adopt Notice first published and Plan placed on Deposit.
- 2 August 2002 - Plan lodged with Scottish Ministers for statutory period of 28 days.

ADOPTION

- 12 September 2002 - Plan Adopted by the full Highland Council.

1. JUSTIFICATION

Background

1.1 Caithness is different from the rest of the Highlands, not least in terms of its landscape and history. Settlement pattern, house designs and building materials are all highly distinctive. Much of this uniqueness emerges from the blend of Viking and Gaelic heritage that influenced the area over many centuries. Even before the Vikings arrived, Caithness had a thriving culture now visible in the extensive archaeological remains.

1.2 The County divides into three broad environments: the coastline with its dramatic cliffs and sandy bays; the moorland of the interior; and the rolling farmland of the Wick and Thurso river basins. Throughout the landscape there is a strong sense of space and openness creating the “big sky country”. Morven and the mass of Scaraben dominate the southern margins. Rich in ecological interest, perhaps the key feature of the landscape is the vast expanse of peatland, extending into Sutherland, forming the largest area of blanket bog in Western Europe.

1.3 Most of the population of around 25000 lives on the coast principally in Wick and Thurso, the main sub regional centres. Several larger villages act as local centres notably Castletown, Halkirk and Lybster. Many of the remaining villages are traditional crofting communities. Well-developed communications link these coastal communities. Inland, communications are more rudimentary with the exception of the Thurso – Wick axis, which includes the main rail line to Inverness. The lengthy journey to the

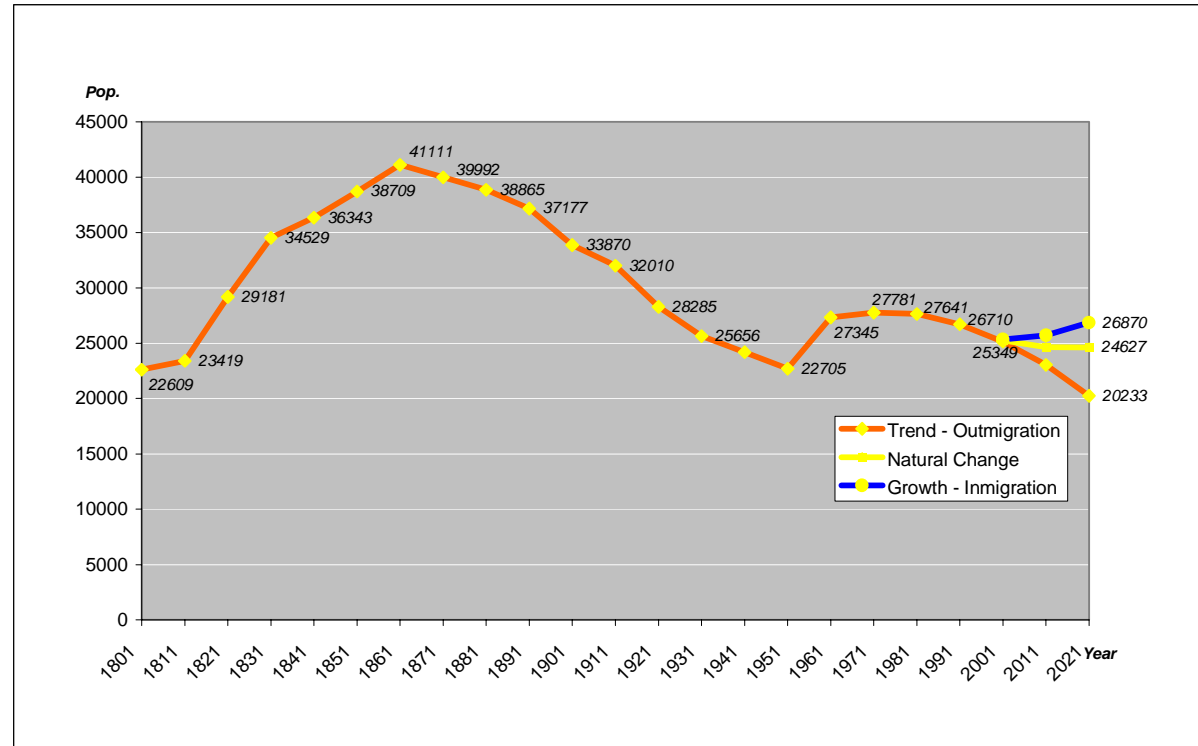


Figure 1: Population 1801 - 2021

south by road and the significantly longer trip by rail mean that the area remains peripheral, although Wick airport provides connections to Inverness and beyond.

1.4 The local economy is based on the primary sector, particularly the raising of beef cattle and sheep. This is confined to the Wick and Thurso river basins, lower river valleys and the coastal strip. Elsewhere, the combination of climate, exposure and geology restrict activity to sporting and pastoral uses. Employment is dominated by the service sector, particularly

tourism, although the County retains a strong manufacturing base. New businesses continue to arrive, with, for example, the call centre and battery factory in Thurso. The UKAEA nuclear plant at Dounreay with a workforce of around 2000 remains the most significant influence on the local economy. Even with on-going decommissioning work it is expected to maintain a significant role for many years to come.

Population

1.5 The chart above shows the County

population since 1801. Since its peak in 1861 it reached a significant low of 22000 in 1951. Fortunes were reversed in large measure due to the development of Dounreay. Population subsequently increased to almost 28,000 by 1971. More recently, however, net migration away from Caithness has re-asserted itself. During 1971-96, the population declined by 6.6%, when Highland as a whole grew by 19%. The greatest proportion of population loss has been from the young adult age group, affected by many leaving for further education and to find work. Within the County, population change varied. In the period 1981-91, the Thurso, Reay and Watten areas all experienced decline. Losses from the first two areas corresponded with job losses at Dounreay and Vulcan, together with the closure of the US Naval base at Forss. The loss of middle managers and professional workers following the 1988 closure of the Fast Reactor had a profound effect on West Caithness. The remaining areas of the County showed a modest increase.

1.6 Government projections continue to suggest an overall fall in population, up to almost 3000 people over the next 15 years. Well-established trends mean that a large decrease in the number of school pupils together with a big increase in pensioners is inevitable. These trends will have significant impacts on service providers. On the other hand, the number of middle-aged persons is unlikely to change significantly. The real 'battleground' is the fight to keep and expand the population of young adults. The Council and partners on the Caithness Partnership believe that with a positive approach to economic development, more employment opportunities can be created. This approach is aimed at halting out-migration in the early years of the Local Plan

with modest or more sustained population growth in the longer term. On this basis a minimum population increase of 1500 people by the year 2021 is a key objective. Figure 2 shows that the largest proportion of this increase is not anticipated until after 2011, which is beyond the period of this Plan.

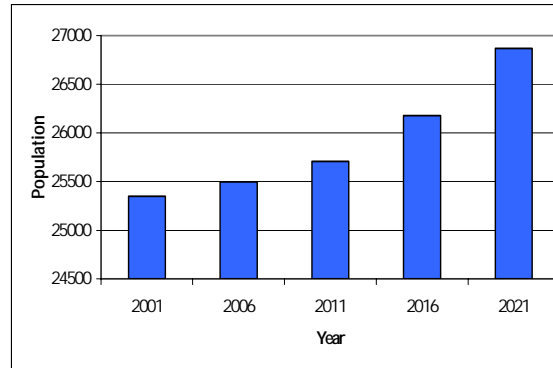


Figure 2: Population 2001 - 2021, assuming successful economic development.

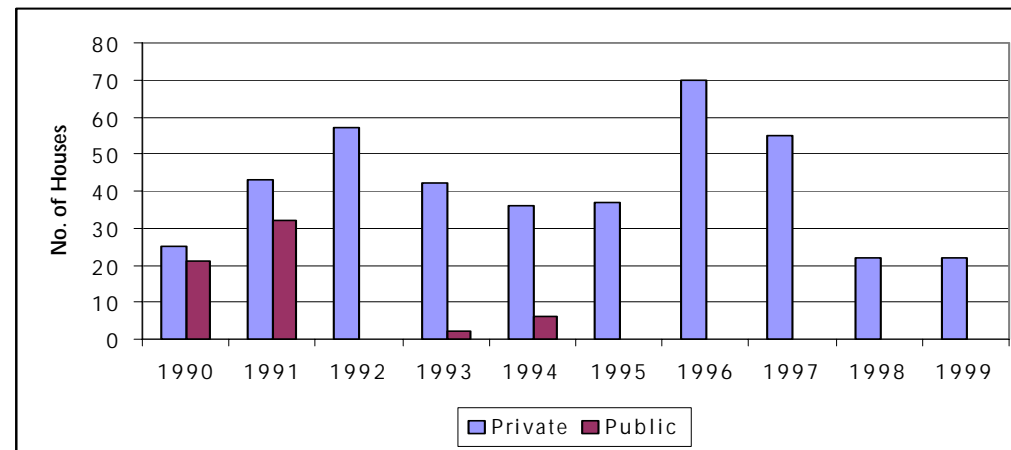


Figure 3: House Completions 1990 - 1999

Housing

1.7 Caithness faces a number of key housing issues:

- 30% of households unable to afford the cheapest houses on the market;
- a mismatch between household size and house size e.g. a large number of single people on the Council's Waiting List but limited single person accommodation;
- affordable rented housing has declined over the last 20 years;
- a need for new affordable housing to meet predicted population change;
- a shortage of suitable housing to rent for incoming workers;
- over 500 households currently living in unsuitable accommodation;
- efforts to renovate substandard and/or vacant properties as opposed to new build are hindered by the inequalities of the current

taxation andcrofting grants systems;

- a large number of vacant and semi-derelict properties in the remoter rural areas, particularly former agricultural workers cottages;
- increasing commuter pressure to build new houses in less suitable locations in the countryside, particularly around the main settlements; and
- a shortage of available and serviced land within settlements for new house building, particularly in the Thurso housing market area.

1.8 Affordable housing, as in many other parts of Highland, is the key housing issue. In 2000 the Council and Scottish Homes formed the Rural Partnership For Change to identify measures required to address the shortage of affordable housing. Measures relevant to Caithness include land use policies seeking a proportion of affordable houses, servicing sites, grant aid and identifying opportunities for social housing providers to develop.

1.9 Over the last decade just under 500 houses were completed in Caithness. Most were in the main settlements but a steadily increasing number were built in the countryside. House building activity is affected by many different factors but population change is probably the single most powerful influence. Official government figures suggest a small decline in the number of households in the coming years, despite the continuing fall in household size. However, if the population levels can recover to a point where net in-migration is sustained the number of households will increase to over 12000. This will generate a need in the period

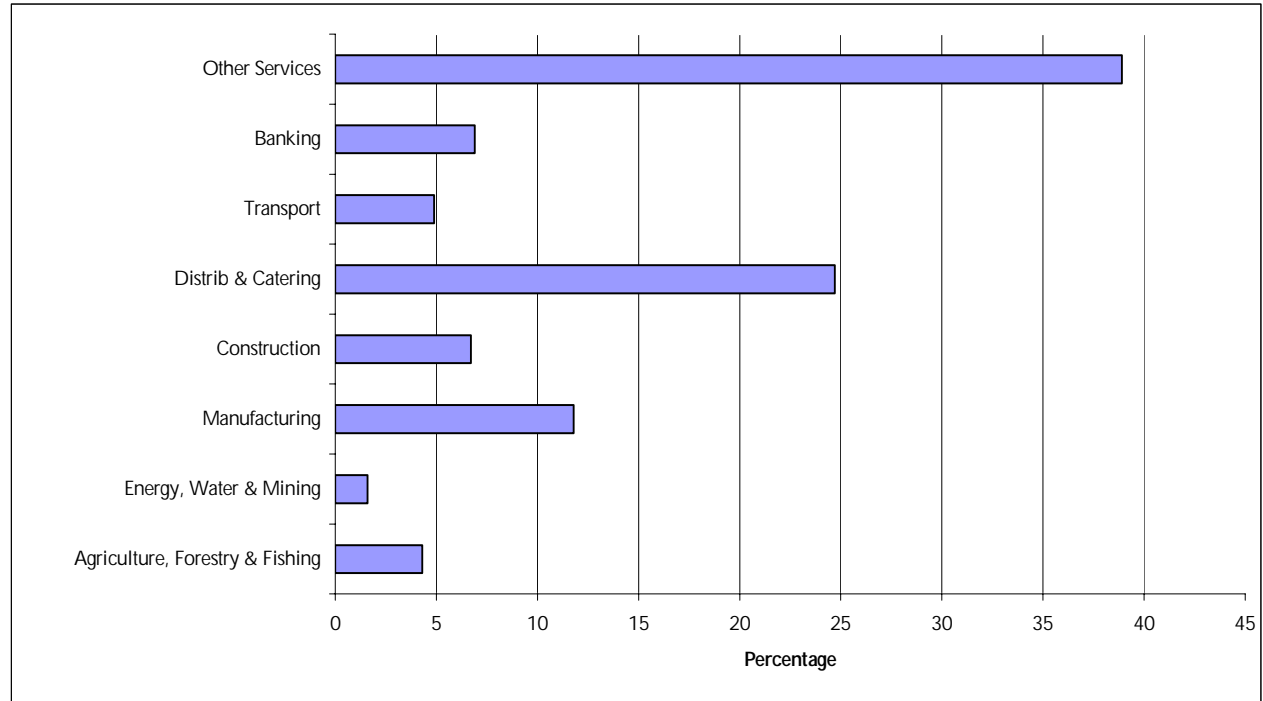


Figure 4: Employment Structure

2000 to 2017 for a minimum of 1380 houses, including an element for choice and flexibility. Government policies are moving further towards developing the majority of new houses on brownfield sites. Such opportunities are limited in the main settlements but there is potential in the countryside to rehabilitate / redevelop vacant, semi-derelict or derelict properties. Immediately beyond the town limits of Wick and Thurso there is a need to restrict new housing to prevent sporadic development, make best use of available infrastructure and retain the quality of the countryside. The Council is in the process of preparing a Housing in the Countryside guideline.

The Local Economy

1.10 Around 9000 people work in Caithness. Most work in the service sector, particularly tourism and public administration, but manufacturing is also well represented. Farming remains a significant component of the Caithness economy, particularly livestock rearing. Peripherality, poorer quality soils and a harsher climate limit production options and direct subsidies form a significant component of net farm incomes. Opportunities for diversification are limited but there is potential to build on the quality of the local environment. Fishing employs relatively few people, although the

industry is currently experiencing a healthy level of activity. A key requirement is to improve facilities at Wick and Scrabster Harbours and encourage local fish processing.

1.11 Large scale afforestation took place throughout the 1980s. Planting on this scale has receded, but the resource remains. The trees will mature in 15 – 20 years with a consequent significant increase in wood production, providing an opportunity through added value for associated economic development.

1.12 The limited number of commercially workable minerals in the area restricts opportunities for extraction, with the exception of flagstone. Readily available flagstone deposits are now supporting a revived quarry industry and there is a huge potential to expand markets locally and throughout the UK and Europe. Despite deposits of granite on the north and east coastlines these are of a type that are not sufficiently marketable to justify extraction costs at a larger scale. Smaller hard rock quarries will serve local needs. The other major mineral is peat, which has been extensively worked to the west of the A9 Causewaymire road and intermittently near Camster, principally for fuel. However, concerns over the wider damage to the environment and a switch to more sustainable sources of alternative energy have more or less terminated commercial extraction interest. The scope for visitor interpretation associated with both flagstone and the peatlands is being considered as part of a tourism strategy.

1.13 Manufacturing is a big employer with almost 1000 people. Most companies are located in Wick and Thurso where the large industrial estates are found. The main exception is Norfrost

in Castletown. Dounreay has been a key sector of the economy for four decades, employing 2300 people at its peak of activity and providing high quality technical job opportunities. At the end of 1999 it was estimated to be employing around 20% of the Caithness based workforce. The key issues are to improve the competitiveness of existing businesses and create a framework of high quality sites and business support for new firms.

1.14 Tourism has struggled in recent years at both the national and local level. There are opportunities to create new visitor attractions and realise the potential of green tourism, but there is also a need to focus on improving quality and marketing techniques. John O'Groats is the key strategic tourist location in Caithness. There is a clear need to expand and substantially improve the current tourist experience through better facilities, improved landscaping and co-ordinated signing. The whole of the north coast road should be promoted as a tourist route based on John O' Groats, the new ferry terminal at Gills, Dunnet Bay and headland and the longer term possibility of opening Castle of Mey to the public.

1.15 The trend in the unemployment rate has been falling recently, in line with national trends, although long term unemployment remains a significant problem. This is particularly the case for the Wick area, which has one of the highest long term unemployment rates in Scotland. Other problems facing the economy are peripherality and the perception of remoteness; poor infrastructure, particularly transport; high cost transport; relatively small local market and dependence on Dounreay. The County also faces increasing competition and continuing centralisation of services.



Photos: Top - timber extraction; middle - John O' Groats; bottom - Halliburton (Rockwater) pipeline, Wester



Photo: Dounreay

1.16 Nevertheless there are grounds for optimism. The area has a high quality environment, a rich culture and heritage, skilled workforce, several high technology industries and an attractive quality of life. Substantial expenditure of the order of £4.5 billion is planned for Dounreay over the next 40 to 60 years for decommissioning and environmental remediation of the site. Around £1.3 billion of this is likely to be spent in the next 10 years during the early stages of the decommissioning process. In this time a large number of highly skilled workers will be recruited when it is hoped to establish an international centre of excellence for decommissioning. As such, the workforce is expected to rise to around 2300 again. Local firms must be encouraged to take advantage of this significant level of investment in the area that will be unrivalled in any other area of Highland or possibly the UK. Equally, as the level of nuclear activity decreases the skills currently available at the establishment will continue to be

encouraged to turn towards other activities within close proximity to the plant and in other parts of Caithness in order to retain people and services.

1.17 The expansion of The North Highland (formerly Thurso) College as part of the University of the Highlands and Islands offers an opportunity to upgrade skills in the area and provide for lifelong learning. Telecommunications, high technology and electronic business continue to expand throughout the world. Caithness has already tapped into this market through the Thurso call centre and new battery factory and can take further advantage if land and support are made available. Further improvements to telecommunications networks, including the ISDN, would offer greater potential. The Aurora Project to gather and process gas from the Atlantic Frontier may also have potential in the longer term although this is dependent on the future price of gas and the taxation regime.

1.18 The County also has its own indigenous high quality manufacturing businesses with established markets. These also need to be supported. Adding value to primary products will become increasingly important whether through food processing or new wood based industries. A quality, pollution free environment will be vital, particularly in food production. Making better links with the opportunities of the natural environment will also be a key feature of the economy. New visitor attractions that are linked to the peatlands, expansion of recreational tourism, especially walking, cycling and bird watching, and greater exploitation of the cultural heritage will become increasingly important over the next 20 years. John O'Groats is a key attraction of international renown with potential to be developed and promoted to support other



Photo: Church and mobile library at Reay

ventures. Improving the quality and range of attractions and widening global trade links also offer potential to improve the County's international appeal. Continued development of high quality hotel accommodation and a establishing purpose built business/conference/ reception centre will be important in this regard.

Community Facilities

1.19 People must have reasonable access to a range of social and community facilities. This is fundamental in providing a quality living environment and sustainable communities. The area enjoys a good range of medical and community facilities, even in the remoter parts. Nevertheless, the viability of rural services is continually under threat. Local shops face competition from larger stores and petrol stations throughout rural Scotland are under threat from higher prices and increasing safety standards. Social services are undergoing rationalisation as

population growth, redistribution and changing standards take effect. Present service levels must be maintained and improved. Reductions in standards offer no incentive for people to stay and raise a family.

1.20 Services in Caithness are delivered through a hierarchy of centres and depend upon the location of settlements, population distribution and accessibility (Appendix I). The current spread of services between Wick and Thurso suggests that further significant development should be concentrated within these communities and the smaller local service centres to support existing levels of provision. An assessment of service levels indicates the following key deficiencies:

- further education facilities;
 - purpose built indoor sports facilities;
 - local multi-purpose community buildings;
 - community / arts Centre.
- In Chapters 5 to 14 the detailed deficiencies and improvements for individual communities are identified.

Fragile Areas

1.21 Some parts of the Plan area are very fragile in social and economic terms by virtue of the combined effects of high unemployment, significant population losses, distance from main centres, loss of key community facilities or low school rolls. In particular, the Structure Plan identifies Dunbeath – Latheron as an area showing signs of decline. Services have been lost and those which remain are vital to their survival. Special action to sustain and stimulate economic activity in this area is justified, including implementation of crofting reforms, exploring

opportunities for development of natural resources, remote working using new technology and better use of the natural and cultural heritage.

Infrastructure & Utilities

1.22 Economic activity in Caithness relies heavily on road access to and from the south. The need to reduce the impact of road traffic, improve energy efficiency and reduce the need to travel are key components of a sustainable development strategy. Despite limited funding, increased investment in transport is vital to overcome the remoteness of Caithness from markets. Further development of the information and telecommunications network will also allow companies to be more integrated within the national as well as the international market place. Adequate provision for water and waste management infrastructure is crucial not only to exploit business opportunities but to retain and enhance the high quality environment, in itself an important economic resource.

Roads

1.23 Investment in upgrading the A9(T) road to the south of the area, including the Dornoch Firth Bridge, has led to considerable improvements in travel time to and from Inverness. The greatest proportion of the A9 and A99 Trunk roads through Caithness are well short of the standard of improvements carried out south of Dornoch, despite long standing proposals by the former Scottish Office. Major improvements in the County and in East Sutherland would provide a range of benefits including reduced travel time to and from Inverness, a reduction in wear and tear on vehicles and improved safety.

The Ord of Caithness to Helmsdale section is of particular concern and its full realignment is a key objective of the Caithness Partnership. The internal network is of a reasonable standard with good connections between the main settlements. There are specific problem areas that affect development opportunities, notably at Newtonhill, Halkirk and Canisbay.



Photo: Dunbeath Bridge

Bus Services

1.24 On the A9(T) regular daily express coaches run between Wick/Thurso and Inverness and further south to Edinburgh and Glasgow. At a more local level, bus services are sparse but are vital links for remote and dispersed communities. Given the distance between centres and any reductions in personal mobility, a co-ordinated or integrated transport system that ensures good access to facilities is essential. As such, community transport schemes may have to supplement existing services in the future.



Photo: Sprinter at Georgemas Junction

Rail Network

1.25 The Inverness-Thurso/Wick or Far North Railway line is important for the economic and social development of the area. It is also a vital part of external communications for Caithness and Orkney. Train journey times still, however, remain long in comparison with road travel. The development of a Dornoch Rail link would considerably shorten journey times between Inverness and Caithness. While pursuance of this is a matter for the railway companies, other means exist in the shorter term to reduce rail journey times to increase passenger and freight use of the line. Signalling investment and rolling stock replacement is in progress, while the potential for a Georgemas chord line, reopening of Halkirk station and a shuttle service between Thurso and Wick are worthy of further investigation. The latter would reduce the journey time to Wick and might prove attractive for commuting purposes and tourism. The recent upsurge in the volume of freight, including

timber, supermarket groceries, pipelines and manufactured goods, is encouraging. Scope exists to transport more timber and mineral products from the area to distant markets, as well as bring goods and fuel into the County. The continuing development of the railfreight terminal at Georgemas is important in this respect.

Harbours

1.26 Wick and Scrabster Harbours are key components of the local infrastructure and economy. Improvements are needed to ensure that both remain competitive. The river piers at Wick need to be secured and a deep water fishery quay provided at Scrabster. Strengthening the harbours may open up other opportunities in fish processing, the cruise liner business and other shipping related developments, including oil supply vessels. The coastline of Caithness contains a number of smaller harbours, developed originally for the fishing industry, which have now declined and lost their original purpose. Many are important to the cultural heritage and are listed for their historical interest. Works are needed to ensure their continuation, as are new development opportunities.

Air Services

1.27 Wick airport is a significant transport resource but remains underused. It offers good access to the Central Belt and on to SE England and the continent and is an important support for the work at Dounreay. There may be opportunities for expansion as a helicopter base for oil exploration and in other air related businesses. Policies need to be in place to maintain the existing level of facilities and to support further growth and improvement.



Photo: Wick Harbour

Cycling

1.28 The Council is developing a Cycling Strategy for the Highland area, in partnership with the Scottish Executive, other agencies and the voluntary sector. Cycling will also be part of an Integrated Transport Strategy. There will be a Local Action Plan for Caithness that will provide details of specific measures and policies. A major concern is safety on the main routes, a key requirement for commuting and cycle touring. Part of the North Sea Cycle Circuit, designated from Inverness to Thurso enters Caithness from the west along the A836 to join up with the Orkney ferry at Scrabster.

Telecommunications

1.29 Adoption of modern telecommunications systems is particularly beneficial for business, educational and commercial activities. Technological advances provide an opportunity for Caithness to overcome locational

disadvantage and places it on an equal competitive footing with other areas for telecommunications-based enterprises. Access to IT systems can reduce the need to travel for specialised services and facilities. The BT Call Centre in Thurso and campuses of the University of the Highlands and Islands have taken advantage of these possibilities. Continued prospects are partly dependent on expansion of networks of microwave and other radio links across the length and breadth of Highland, balanced with the amenity for local residents, the level of local support for developments and the impact on the natural heritage.

Foul Drainage

1.30 European legislation, increasing environmental awareness and the economic benefits of good clean beaches, water based recreation and wildlife tourism have all increased pressures for improvement of public drainage systems. Major deficiencies remain, notably at Wick, Castletown, Newtonhill, Murkle and Scarfskerry. Where there are difficulties with septic tanks and it is not feasible to conduct sewage effluent to public sewage systems there may be scope for the use of individual sewage treatment systems. This might include package biological treatment plants or reed beds discharging to land, or in exceptional circumstances, to watercourses.

Surface Water Drainage/Flooding

1.31 The Council have an obligation under the Flood Prevention and Land Drainage Act 1997 to consider wider aspects of flooding. This includes problems due to inadequate capacity in combined piped systems and where it occurs

naturally or through lack of maintenance of watercourses. Wick and Thurso suffer when tides are high and rivers running full. There are also problems in parts of Wick, Lybster and Castletown with old and inadequate piped systems. Care must also be taken over the location of new development to limit future flooding problems. The recently introduced concept of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) limits run-off from development sites through the use of facilities such as soakaways and detention basins. Some of these require substantial areas of land to implement and will influence site layouts.

Water Supply

1.32 Substantial upgrading of water supplies has been carried out in recent years to augment pressure, replace ageing local distribution mains and improve quality. The major problem area is to the south of Lybster which lies at the extremity of the system and where substantial investment is required before significant development can go ahead.



Photo: existing sewage macerator at Thurso

Waste Management

1.33 As part of the developing Highland Waste Strategy the large scale landfill site at Seater is expected to continue to play a strategic role in the disposal of refuse from Caithness and part of Sutherland. The Council also needs to consider how it may be able to achieve government targets for recycling in an area remote from existing major facilities. Recycling of building materials, especially flagstone, and land are particularly encouraged as sustainable development objectives. The issue of radioactive waste associated with activities at Dounreay generates concerns across the Highlands and beyond. In view of this strategic significance, the Structure Plan addresses it in more detail. Appropriate methods of dealing with the treatment, conditioning, packaging, storage and eventual disposal of waste arising from Dounreay are actively being considered with the relevant regulatory bodies.

Renewable Energy

1.34 Opportunities to harness the renewable energy potential of Caithness (especially wind, wave and tidal stream power) have been investigated in recent years, partly stimulated by the Government's Scottish Renewables Obligation (SRO) initiative and now the imminent Renewables Obligation (Scotland). Smaller scale 'stand-alone schemes' can help meet local needs. Potential sites for wind energy need in Caithness need to be assessed in relation to the criteria outlined in the Approved Structure Plan. The Dounreay site and its highly skilled workforce may offer a potential location for a centre for alternative energy technology development.

Environment

1.35 A key element of any strategy for sustainability is the conservation and enhancement of the environment. This means ensuring an acceptable balance between economic growth and safeguards for the environment. It requires the protection of habitats and species important to biodiversity, safeguarding of sensitive landscapes and significant geological and geomorphological features and important cultural features, such as Listed Buildings and archaeological sites. Equally, the countryside in general requires care and attention.

1.36 Caithness contains a rich variety of habitats, ranging from cliffs and sandy bays to the internationally important Flow Country peatlands. The need to maintain this diversity is now widely recognised as fundamental to present and future generations. The Flow Country, nominated to UNESCO as a tentative World Heritage Site, is a vitally important habitat in a European and world context. This biodiversity contributes to the economy through tourism and primary production and to the quality of life for local people. The Council recognises that this resource needs to be protected. Habitats also need to be improved, spoiled land restored, notably the remains of the flagstone industry; the traditional land use structure diversified and public access increased. Enhancement of towns and villages is also important to improve their attractiveness to residents and visitors. Such improvements often stimulate investment in business and residential property to assist economic growth.

1.37 Greater attention must also be given to local character and identity. The form and scale of village development, the siting and design of new houses in the countryside, the promotion and planning of open space and new tree planting must also be carefully considered in relation to their impact on the landscape. The land on the margins of major settlements can suffer from degradation and encroachment through population growth and town expansion. Equally, it can provide a quality recreational and amenity area for local people. In this regard Countryside Around Town Projects can be beneficial in promoting properly planned access to the countryside. The greatest challenge is to embrace change and development whilst directly relating this to the distinct character of the landscape, protecting and enhancing its unique qualities.

1.38 The Council's strategy for protection of the environment follows a hierarchical approach ranging from international sites through national sites to locally important sites. These have varying degrees of protection and development potential. Developments affecting international and national sites are possible if they are compatible with maintaining the features for which the sites are designated. Proposals affecting local sites must have regard to the interest involved but need not preclude development.

1.39 As part of the Structure Plan Review, the Council has identified large scale areas of regional importance for scenic quality, known as Regional Scenic Areas and Coasts (RSA/RSC). These include juxtapositions of mountain and moorland, such as Morven/Scaraben and the Flow Country, and dramatic and striking coastlines,

such as Dunnet and Duncansby Heads. The former Areas of Great Landscape Value if not included within these areas are now identified as locally important areas requiring recreation management.

1.40 A detailed appraisal of landscape character and forces for change in Caithness and Sutherland was completed in 1997. This is aimed at promoting a general understanding of the Caithness and Sutherland landscape, particularly the range and type of landscape character, the forces for and ability to absorb change. A summary of the document is provided in Appendix II. The detailed scope of guidance is set out in the full report available from Scottish Natural Heritage.



Photo: Stacks of Duncansby