

A96 CORRIDOR MASTERPLAN

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

Final Report

by

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DECEMBER 2004

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1. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Background

- 1.1. Craigforth was appointed to undertake consultation with members of local communities located within the A96 corridor between Inverness and Nairn in support of FG Burnett's work on preparing a masterplan for the area on behalf of The Highland Council.
- 1.2. The consultation included key representatives from community organisations as well as members of the general public. The main aims were:
 - To test local opinion about where new development should be best located in the corridor based on a range of realistic development options; and
 - To explore the reasons for people's opinions and the potential pros and cons associated with each of the development options.
- 1.3. It should be noted that the consultation was not specifically seeking people's views on the rationale behind new proposals in the corridor as the area had already been identified for long term growth through development plan preparation processes and inquiry.

Methodology

- 1.4. The study method originally proposed a series of 5 or 6 focus groups for members of the public from communities throughout the corridor. It was intended that 2 of these groups explored the views of young people given the long term nature of the development planned and it was proposed that these be recruited from local secondary schools. A consultative conference was also proposed to gather the views of more informed members of the public, involving representatives from community organisations active in the area (notably Community Councils) as well as local elected members of the Council.
- 1.5. Due to the pattern of demand for different timing slots a total of 4 focus groups were held with members of the public as part of the consultation process. All 4 groups were held at Inverness Airport's conference facilities on 24 and 25 November (one afternoon and one evening group each day). The airport was selected as a convenient central location with reasonably good transport links.
- 1.6. The aim was to recruit around 8 attendees for each focus group and Craigforth originally suggested the use of incentive payments to ensure a good response and that participants included those who would not normally take part in such activities. However it was decided not to use incentives and as a result an extensive mailing had to be undertaken to ensure the required level of participation. A total of 900 invites were issued using a sample of individuals drawn randomly from the electoral roll.

- 1.7. The corridor was divided into 3 areas for the purposes of recruiting focus group attendees, defined by local authority wards:
- Smithton/Culloden/Balloch area, incorporating Culloden, Westhill & Smithton and Balloch wards;
 - West Nairn area, incorporating Nairn Altan and the majority of the Nairn Cawdor wards; and
 - A Central Ardersier/Croy/Petty area, incorporating Ardersier, Croy & Petty and small parts of Nairn Cawdor wards.
- 1.8. The electoral roll for the corridor was split into these 3 areas and 300 individuals were randomly selected from each, giving a total sample of 900. Whilst not strictly proportionate in terms of the numerical distribution of households within the corridor, stratifying the sample in this way ensured a good geographical spread.
- 1.9. From the 900 invites issued 51 individuals indicated that they would be able to attend. A total of 39 people actually attended the focus groups, although it should be noted that this included a small number who had not received an invitation and/or had not confirmed their place. Attendees were split 21 male /18 female and ages are estimated to have ranged from under 30 through to over 70, the majority being over 50 years of age. They represented most towns and villages in the corridor and the location of their home residence is set out below:

Origin of Focus Group Attendees

Allanfearn	1	Dalcross	3
Ardersier	6	Gollanfield	2
Assich	3	Loch Flemington	2
Balloch	3	Nairn	7
Croy/Cantray	7	Smithton	1
Culloden	1	Tornagrain	1
Culloden Moor	1	Westhill	1

- 1.10. Contact was made with Nairn Academy and Culloden Academy as the most appropriate venues for the two proposed focus groups with young people. However, logistical constraints meant that the groups would need to be held on certain days and it was not possible to arrange this with the schools within the relatively short study timescale. Interest in taking part was stronger in one school than the other and there were also difficulties because of the time of year with senior pupils about to sit prelims. When the schools option failed, attempts were made to access youth groups in the Balloch/Smithton/Culloden and Nairn areas and while interested in taking part, they too could not respond to the study's timescales. As a result it was decided not to proceed with this element of the consultation although it is recommended that consultation is carried out with young people later in the masterplanning process.

- 1.11. The consultative conference was held on the afternoon of 27 November at the Highland Council headquarters in Inverness. Letters were issued to each Community Council and one residents association in the area, inviting 4 or more members of each organisation to attend.
- 1.12. In total 12 Community Council members attended the conference, accounting for a range of Community Councils throughout the corridor:
- Ardersier Community Council
 - Balloch Community Council
 - Croy and Culloden Moor Community Council
 - Nairn Suburban Community Council
 - Smithton and Culloden Community Council
 - West Nairnshire Community Council
- 1.13. Although the conference was intended for members of local community organisations it was made clear to those attending that they had been invited as 'informed' local people rather than to represent the official views of their organisation – there being opportunities later in the planning process for this. The first half of the conference, which focused on explaining the 4 development options and airing any general concerns, was also attended by Highland Council planning staff and local councillors from the corridor.

2. THE 4 STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT OPTIONS

- 2.1. The strategic development options presented and discussed at the focus groups and consultative conference were drawn up following a technical assessment of development options for the area, and were refined through workshop sessions with key stakeholders including statutory agencies, local businesses and land owners. The 4 resulting options look only at development beyond the year 2011 and proposals are in addition to any land or proposals already identified for development.
- 2.2. It was made clear to all consultees that at this early stage, whilst distinct in terms of proposed patterns of growth, the 4 options were not necessarily mutually exclusive. In particular it was highlighted that specific proposals for the development of local infrastructure and amenities (eg rail and road improvements, recreation/landscaping proposals) presented in one option could be included in other options.
- 2.3. While recognising that there were key issues around infrastructure and service provision in the corridor, consultees were asked to assume that essential facilities and amenities (water, sewerage works, transport links, schools, etc) would be provided in some form alongside any new development.
- 2.4. The 4 strategic options are summarised below.

Option A: Eastern Growth

- 2.5. Option A concentrates new development in a number of new and existing settlements at the eastern end of the corridor. This would involve:
 - Building 2 new settlements of 2-7,000 houses to the north of the A96 between Nairn and Ardersier.
 - Major development at Ardersier Fabrication Yard to provide housing (around 500 houses) and employment.
 - Major growth of Ardersier village, expanding the current 500 houses to perhaps up to 5,000 houses.
 - A new local distributor road network linking the new and expanded settlements.
 - Upgrading the A96 to dual carriageway along its whole length between Nairn and Inverness.
 - Providing 2 new bypasses; one for Nairn and one from the Raigmore Interchange to the A9 south.
 - A new rail halt on the existing rail line at Inverness Airport.
 - Landscaping and recreational areas between the new and expanded settlements, and also north of the A96 between the Airport and Inverness city. New recreation routes would link these areas with Inverness and Nairn, with a further route provided parallel to the A96 between Nairn and the Culloden, Smithton and Balloch area.

Option B: Polar Growth

2.6. Option B focuses new development at either end of the corridor and would involve:

- Major expansion of Nairn along the A96 to the west of around 5-7,000 houses.
- Major expansion of Inverness east along the A96 “Golden Mile” involving both housing and employment; new development of around 5-7,000 houses either between the A96 and Culloden/Smithton/Balloch or north of the A96 towards Alturlie Point. Employment would be provided in the area around the Raigmore Interchange.
- No additional growth at Croy, Newlands/Culloden Moor or Ardersier.
- 2 new by passes, one at Nairn and one from the Raigmore Interchange to the A9 south, but not necessarily upgrading the whole of the A96 to dual carriageway.
- 3 new rail halts along the existing rail line; one at Inverness Airport and one in each area of new development.
- Ardersier Fabrication Yard retained for industry and employment.
- New landscaping and recreational areas north of the A96 between the Airport and Inverness city. New coastal recreation routes would link these areas with Inverness and Nairn, with a further route provided parallel to the A96 between Nairn and the Culloden, Smithton and Balloch area.

Option C: Smaller Settlement Growth

2.7. Option C focuses new development in major growth of existing smaller settlements between Inverness and Nairn:

- Major expansion of both Croy and Newlands/Culloden Moor; up to 5-7,000 new houses in each, in addition to the 2-300 houses already approved through the Local Plan.
- Expansion of Ardersier village, at least doubling its size to 1,000+ houses.
- Major upgrading of the existing B roads between Croy, Newlands and the A9 south, creating major distributors linking the two towns to a new interchange on the A9 south of Inverness (bypassing the Raigmore Interchange).
- The option would not necessarily include any major upgrading of the A96.
- A new rail halt on the existing rail line at Newlands/Culloden Moor.
- Ardersier Fabrication Yard used either for housing and employment (as in option A) or for industry and employment (as in option B).
- A series of new landscaping and recreational areas north and south of the A96 between the Airport and Inverness city. New coastal recreation routes would link these areas with Inverness and Nairn, with a further route provided parallel to the A96 between Nairn and the Culloden, Smithton and Balloch area.

Option D: Mainly Central Growth

- 2.8. Option D concentrates new development in a major new development in the centre of the corridor and some limited expansion of existing settlements at either end of the corridor. This would involve:
- The creation of a major new settlement of around 7-10,000 houses, south of the Airport and the A96 towards Croy.
 - Some expansion of Nairn along the A96 to the west; perhaps around 1-3,000 houses in addition to what is proposed through the current Local Plan.
 - Some development to the east of Balloch, again perhaps around 1-3,000 houses.
 - No additional development at Ardersier or Newlands/Culloden Moor.
 - Upgrading the A96 to dual carriageway along its whole length between Nairn and Inverness, including upgrading of the Raigmore Interchange.
 - A new by pass at Nairn (only), west of the new development.
 - A new local link road from the A96 east of Inverness to the A9 south, through the Culloden, Smithton and Balloch area.
 - A new rail halt on the existing rail line at Inverness Airport.
 - New public transport services:
 - a high frequency priority shuttle bus transit route between Nairn and Inverness along the A96 and servicing the new central settlement; and
 - new Park and Ride facilities at the Airport (bus and rail) and on the A96 north of Culloden/Smithton/Balloch (bus only).
 - Ardersier Fabrication Yard used either for housing and employment (as in option A) or for industry and employment (as in option B).
 - A new coastal recreation route linking Nairn and Inverness, and a further route parallel to the A96 between Nairn and the Culloden, Smithton and Balloch area.

3. KEY ISSUES ARISING FROM CONSULTATION

- 3.1. While the consultation process was focused on the 4 strategic development options outlined above, much of the discussion in focus groups and the consultative conference focused on the principles which informed the options and the specific elements included in each.
- 3.2. This section considers the key common issues arising from the consultation while the section that follows looks specifically at opinions on each of the 4 options.

Scale and pattern of growth

- 3.3. Future plans for growth were presented as requiring to accommodate up to an additional 30,000 people which could involve the building of up to 12,500 houses or more in new or expanded communities in the A96 corridor.
- 3.4. Whilst relatively few people were unaware of plans for some degree of future growth, there was considerable surprise amongst both focus group and more informed conference attendees regarding the scale of growth planned.
- 3.5. Significant concerns were expressed regarding the basis of the growth projections, and there was some scepticism that the level of population growth projected for the area would be realised. This view was informed by an awareness that national population projections predict a decline in Scotland's population levels over the period. There was an expectation that any future population growth must be exclusively linked to future in-migration rather than indigenous growth. Some focus group participants felt that growth projections may have been influenced by over-optimism on the part of the Council in light of Inverness' new city status.
- 3.6. Overall reactions to the planned growth ranged from a number of individuals who were very unhappy about the proposals to a majority who were somewhat resigned to the fact that growth was going to take place. However only a small minority of participants welcomed the proposed growth, although these reactions seemed to be based more on proposals for development at particular sites rather than the overall scale or pattern of growth.
- 3.7. A number of participants expressed resentment about the potential threat of Inverness expansion on the surrounding A96 corridor area, in particular concern that the environment and general quality of the area would be spoilt to meet the needs of the expanding city. Indeed it was pointed out that the scale of the proposed growth could compromise the area's rural character to such an extent that it may no longer be attractive to existing residents, incomers or tourists.
- 3.8. There was also some feeling that the need for growth was "Inverness's problem" and that any major development should be focused on the city itself to preserve the character of the corridor. However, other participants felt that previous expansion of Inverness had polarised the area to the detriment of the corridor in terms of the quality and development of local facilities and services, and that centring more development on Inverness would exacerbate this problem.

- 3.9. Perceptions that the projected growth was based largely on the expansion of Inverness may also have influenced concerns expressed during focus groups and the conference about locating development growth exclusively in the A96 corridor. It was made clear to participants that physical and environmental constraints precluded the possibility of further growth to the north, west or south of Inverness. However, some attendees again expressed scepticism regarding the validity of these constraints.
- 3.10. Consultees identified a range of potential constraints affecting the locations proposed for development in the options which they felt might affect the overall feasibility of locating 12,500 houses or more in the corridor. While reference was made to locations throughout the corridor, some comments focused specifically on proposals for development north of the A96 between Nairn and Ardersier (including Ardersier village and Fabrication Yard). The key constraints identified included:
- The need to destroy good agricultural land;
 - Poor drainage and difficult terrain;
 - Proximity to flight paths around Inverness Airport, particularly given the proposed expansion of the Airport;
 - Sensitive natural environments and valued green belt/recreation land; and
 - Proximity to existing sewerage works (north of A96 between the Airport and Inverness).
- 3.11. There was some difference of opinion amongst focus group and conference participants regarding the issue of whether growth should be delivered through the creation of new settlements or the expansion of existing communities.
- 3.12. Significant concern was expressed that the expansion of existing settlements (eg Option C) would completely change the character of those settlements, destroying the basis of their attraction for current residents. Unsurprisingly, this was a particular issue for residents of these smaller settlements who tended to support options focusing on the creation of new communities (although it should be noted that these participants tended to be quite strongly opposed to large scale development of any kind). There was also wider concern regarding the impact on valued rural areas surrounding and between settlements and it was suggested that over time the expanded settlements would merge; this possibility met with universal disapproval.
- 3.13. The potential for the conglomeration of individually distinct settlements was also a contributing factor to the views of those participants opposed to the delivery of growth through the creation of new settlements. There was also concern that new large scale housing developments may not fit in with the area and that screening/landscaping would need to be carefully planned to preserve the character of the corridor.

- 3.14. However a bigger issue for participants was whether the Council could successfully deliver new communities of a high quality and of sympathetic design and there was much scepticism in this regard. There was also to some degree an expectation that no matter what, developers will build what they want to. Participants found it difficult to envisage a successful new community of a scale equivalent to 'at least a new Nairn' with expectations being in part determined by negative perceptions of new towns in general (eg Livingston, Cumbernauld) and more locally on experience of the development of Culloden, Smithton and Balloch.
- 3.15. Central to people's concerns was a fear surrounding the extent to which the required infrastructure and amenities would be provided, and in particular whether they would be provided timeously. There were a number of suggestions that Culloden, Smithton and Balloch had to wait a considerable time for the full range of infrastructure/amenities to be provided and it was felt that this compromised the success of these new communities to some extent.
- 3.16. Most recognised that it may not be feasible to provide all relevant services in early on but it was felt that the success of any new communities would depend on the delivery of a core of infrastructure and amenities early in the development process. This core included roads, schools and other local services. However, it should be noted that some scepticism remained regarding the likely success of new settlements, even if a good range of facilities were provided.
- 3.17. The alternative of focusing development on the extension of larger existing settlements of Inverness and Nairn had some support partly because this pattern of growth would not require the same infrastructure (most facilities already being available and accessible) and that it would not 'destroy' the character of other settlements.
- 3.18. In particular there was some support for the extension of Nairn or development near Nairn based largely on the potential to counterbalance (what some see as detrimental) effects of Inverness's recent growth on the corridor. It was agreed that amenities and shopping facilities in Nairn had declined significantly over a number of years; the possibility of reviving the town centre and expanding the labour pool through additional development was welcomed by most.
- 3.19. However, concerns were expressed by some - in particular Nairn residents - about the effect of significant new development on the character of the town. Whilst it was agreed that Nairn could absorb substantial development more easily than smaller settlements there was some reluctance to see it grow from a small town to somewhere much more substantial.

Transport links and other infrastructure issues

- 3.20. The A96 itself was clearly a major cause of concern and frustration for focus group and conference participants, and proposals to upgrade the A96 to dual carriageway between Inverness and Nairn were met with universal approval. Most felt that upgrading was long overdue and would be required irrespective of any new development.

- 3.21. Indeed it is no exaggeration to say that everyone had the view that any more development on a significant scale in the corridor would be unacceptable until this issue is addressed. The A96 is regarded as 'a disaster waiting to happen' (reference to concerns regarding road safety) although it is recognised that some of the problems arise from irresponsible behaviour and frustration on the part of drivers (e.g. dangerous overtaking, being stuck behind farm vehicles etc).
- 3.22. Participants were frustrated about the length of time over which the A96 upgrading had been discussed and there was a lack of clarity regarding the current status of proposals for upgrading. There was however an awareness that it would take considerable time to agree and carry out plans to upgrade even a part of the stretch between Inverness and Nairn, and that this should delay any plans for major growth in the area.
- 3.23. Whilst the dualling of the A96 and the provision of by passes at either end of the corridor seem to be the major local transport issues there was a more general concern that the road network as a whole could not support the increase in traffic and that local roads would need to be improved to handle the additional traffic volume generated by the proposed growth.
- 3.24. There was also support for the possibility of improvements to public transport infrastructure (eg new rail halts, improved bus services, park and ride) as part of a strategy to handle the increase in traffic volume. However it was clearly felt that services would need to be more sensitive to users' needs than existing services and be properly co-ordinated to be successful. Some participants had reservations about the extent to which current and new residents could be convinced to move away from car use.
- 3.25. As noted, focus group and conference participants felt that the provision of adequate new infrastructure and amenities would be crucial to the success of any new development, and that infrastructure has to be put in place as development happens rather than after it is complete.
- 3.26. There was some concern about the capacity of existing sewerage and waste management facilities and the perceived lack of appropriate sites for the provision of new facilities. However, the most pressing concern was that sufficient new schools and hospital/other health facilities would be provided to service any increase in population.
- 3.27. Participants felt that local primary and particularly secondary schools were at capacity with the current population, and there was a strong feeling that new schools would be required. Similarly there was concern that Raigmore Hospital was struggling to handle current demand for services and would not be able to cope with any increased need for services.
- 3.28. The Airport was felt to be central to any plans for major growth in the area but there was a lack of clarity regarding plans for extension to the Airport, and any arising business or employment opportunities. The possible impact of flight paths and related noise on proposals for major development, particularly north of the A96 between Nairn and Ardersier, was a factor in participants' views on the options.

Employment

- 3.29. The issue of employment was a major factor in participants' reaction to the proposed scale of growth in the area; some clearly felt that the Inverness city region could not provide sufficient employment opportunities to sustain up to 30,000 additional people. Indeed it was questioned how the city's employment opportunities could be increased to serve the additional population if development in the city was so constrained.
- 3.30. All felt that there was a need to focus on developing employment opportunities in the corridor (specifically) parallel to any housing development. Indeed it was suggested that most potential incomers would want to secure employment before committing to living in the area. The prospect of employment growth focused exclusively on Inverness was not welcomed and was viewed as potentially merely adding to traffic and transport problems on the A96 as well as being environmentally unsound by encouraging people to travel longer distances to work.

Profile of new housing development

- 3.31. Some participants had concerns over the profile of new homes likely to be built in the corridor. While they were reassured that the intention would be to provide a mix ranging from social rented housing through to the luxury end of the private housing market, there were strong views that there should be a strong 'affordable housing' element, especially in light of recent house price increases in the area.

4. VIEWS ON THE 4 STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT OPTIONS

- 4.1. As noted earlier, focus group and conference participants were encouraged to give their views on the distinctive elements of each option as well as on the option as a whole.
- 4.2. Although there were differences of opinion regarding the preferred pattern of any new development (eg new settlements vs expansion of existing communities), clear views emerged on most other features of the options.
- 4.3. Views on the main features of the strategic options are summarised below, followed by a more detailed account of views on each option.

Views on key features

Transport improvements

- 4.4. The A96 itself was the single biggest issue for focus group and conference participants and its dualling was one of the few features that was universally supported. Indeed all felt that the dualling was needed irrespective of any future growth and that the issue would need to be addressed before further major development could begin.
- 4.5. The majority of participants welcomed proposals for the provision of by passes as part of any A96 upgrading, in particular at Nairn. There were significant concerns about the volume of traffic being taken through Nairn by the A96 (especially in light of the central location of schools in the town) and it was felt that a by pass west of Nairn was "long overdue". There were some suggestions that a by pass may take valuable business away from the already declining town centre, but most felt that this could be avoided if the regeneration of the town centre was handled properly.
- 4.6. The wider local road network was also a cause for concern. While there was support for the provision of new roads to serve new and expanded settlements (eg Option A) few felt that local roads between Croy and the A9 south could be upgraded sufficiently to handle the growth of Croy and Newlands proposed in Option C.
- 4.7. There was general support for proposed public transport upgrades as part of a strategy to minimise increases in traffic flows. The majority supported the provision of a new rail halt at the Airport and felt that this could result in a significant reduction in traffic but that significant parking would be required. There was less enthusiasm for other proposed new rail halts (eg towards Nairn and Inverness in Option B and at Newlands in option C); most felt that these would not be used as widely as a new Airport halt.

- 4.8. The proposal to provide a park and ride service (bus and rail) at the new Airport halt was also popular, although participants stressed the importance of adequate parking at nil/minimum cost if it was to have any chance of success. Some felt that a rail park and ride would be more popular than a bus only service, and the proposal for another (bus only) service towards Inverness was not so widely supported. Opinion was split regarding the merits of a new bus shuttle service as a whole, and some suggested that a rail service might be more popular. However, most agreed that a high frequency, inexpensive bus service could be attractive.
- 4.9. There needed to be an understanding in the development of any new or upgraded transport services that the demand is not limited or even dominated by people going into Inverness town centre. Indeed it was suggested that for travel to work purposes such a service would be of limited use as many people worked in the city's outskirts eg in business and retail parks.

New central settlement (Option D)

- 4.10. Opinion was varied regarding the creation of a new central settlement in the corridor. Some participants preferred the creation of a new settlement(s) to the expansion of existing communities and felt that this could be an attractive option. However, there was widespread scepticism regarding the likely success of a "new town" - experience of Culloden, Smithton and Balloch and wider concern about the ability to provide the required infrastructure was a major factor here. There were some suggestions that the creation of a series of smaller new communities (eg Option A) may be a less risky approach.

Expansion of Nairn and Inverness (Options B and D)

- 4.11. Again opinion was split regarding the merits of expanding existing settlements. There was some concern that expanding the largest settlements (in particular Inverness) could "polarise" the area further, a number of participants already concerned about the effect of Inverness's rapid growth on the area.
- 4.12. The potential to revitalise Nairn through new development was particularly popular and there was widespread concern that the town had become 'stagnant' in recent years. In light of this proposals for further expansion of Inverness were less popular overall, and some specific concerns were expressed about locations identified for development to the east of the city.
- 4.13. The need to minimise the impact on neighbouring smaller communities and on the environment was seen as critical to most.

Expansion of Ardersier (Options A and C)

- 4.14. A number of participants, including residents, supported the limited growth of Ardersier village but there were reservations about the large scale growth proposed in Option A. It was agreed that the village needed "something to be done" and that new facilities and services were required, but that some of the village's rural appeal needed to be maintained. Most felt that development at Ardersier Fabrication Yard could help to rejuvenate the village.

Expansion of smaller settlements (Option C - Croy and Newlands)

- 4.15. There was little general support for this proposal and local residents were strongly opposed to any large scale growth of Croy or Newlands. The main concern was the impact on the rural appeal of the villages and the destruction of existing communities - this was in the context of a general concern about the extent to which the new population would integrate with existing communities. Residents of new estates in these and surrounding villages were not felt to have integrated well and were seen to lead 'commuter suburban' lives focused on Inverness, with little interest in the communities themselves.
- 4.16. There was also wider concern about the destruction of the surrounding environment, the impact on tourism and about capacity of local roads to handle traffic, even given plans for upgrading.

Development at Culloden, Smithton and Balloch (Options B and D):

- 4.17. Although not as strong as opposition to the large scale growth of Croy and Newlands, there were concerns about any growth at Culloden, Smithton and Balloch, most notably from local residents. Residents are keen to remain distinct from Inverness, are opposed to the erosion of the green wedge between the towns and the A96 by development proposed in Option B. It was suggested that development to the south of Balloch should be restricted, and that the location identified for development in Option D may be reserved as green belt in the Local Plan.

Development at Ardersier Fabrication Yard (all Options)

- 4.18. Almost all participants supported some form of new development at the Fabrication Yard and the site was seen as an important potential source of employment for the corridor. However, there was a lack of clarity surrounding the 'land use zoning' of the Fabrication Yard and requirements on the current owners to remove in situ infrastructure and amenities returning the site to its natural state.
- 4.19. In terms of specific proposals for development there was some support for development to include some housing provision, and it was suggested that the area could be attractive to house buyers. However, concerns were expressed about the site's distance from main transport routes (eg the A96) and also about the feasibility of locating housing and industry/employment in such close proximity.
- 4.20. The possibility of a marina development incorporating tourism, recreation and up market housing or even holiday accommodation, had some support from participants who valued the area's natural environment. A small minority wanted to see the area returned to it's natural state and used for recreation purposes.

- 4.21. Others suggested that it may be preferable to maximise employment opportunities by developing the land exclusively for industry and employment. A number of participants opposed any proposal to locate waste disposal and other infrastructural services in the area and suggested that this would compromise the surrounding environment, although some others could see the benefit of the site for this purpose if proper screening was provided.

Recreation, landscaping and recreation routes (all options)

- 4.22. Support for proposed recreation and landscaping areas, and related recreation routes, was almost universal. All participants felt that extensive landscaping and recreation facilities would need to be provided irrespective of the pattern of development. Landscaping areas were seen as particularly important to minimise the visual impact of major new development, in particular to shield Croy from a new central settlement and to maintain the green area around Culloden, Smithton and Balloch.

Views on Options

Focus Group 1

- 4.23. The first focus group was held at 1.30pm on 24 November 2004. 8 people attended the group including residents of Ardersier, Croy, Culloden Moor, Gollanfield, Loch Flemington and Nairn(3).
- 4.24. The group tended to support Option A - 6 participants chose this as their preferred option including all 3 Nairn residents. There was a general preference towards the creation of smaller communities rather than a single large central settlement, although some had reservations about the possibility for future conglomeration of scattered small settlements.
- 4.25. The experience of the development of Culloden, Smithton and Balloch contributed to concerns about proposals for new settlements and it was strongly felt that new infrastructure and facilities would be required early in the development process.
- 4.26. The preference for **Option A** was based largely on support for:
- The possibility of new development benefiting Nairn by providing demand for improved shops and other facilities.
 - Upgrading of the A96 - this was felt to be the biggest issue in the area.
 - The provision of a by pass at Nairn.
 - A new rail halt at the Airport.
 - The regeneration of Ardersier village through major development.
 - Redevelopment of Ardersier Fabrication Yard - participants felt that this could be an attractive area for house buyers if properly landscaped.
- 4.27. Notwithstanding majority support, a number of reservations were expressed about the option. Most notably some felt that Inverness would remain the focus of the corridor in terms of employment and recreation/shopping, and that locating new development at the eastern end of the corridor did not make sense in terms of traffic flows.

- 4.28. There was some limited support for **Option B** with two of the participants indicating that it was their preferred option, one suggesting that it should include some expansion of Ardersier. The reasons for this support included:
- That by expanding existing settlements it may encourage the development/ expansion of existing facilities (rather than requiring wholly new facilities) and thus may be preferable.
 - That by expanding Nairn and in particular Inverness may be more sensible environmentally by reducing the level of traffic.
 - There was strong support for greater use of rail links to ease the pressure on the A96 and local road network, although there was more support for a rail halt at the Airport than at the 2 other locations for development.
 - Participants expressed concerns about the suitability of locations identified for housing east of Inverness, particularly regarding the smell from local sewerage works and mud banks which is already an issue for local residents.
- 4.29. None of the participants preferred **Option C**. There was some support for the smaller scale expansion of Ardersier village, but this was the only popular aspect of the option. Reasons for not supporting this option included:
- There was concern that the option does not include proposals to upgrade transport facilities - participants felt that A96 dualling, new by passes and a rail halt at the Airport were all essential.
 - It was suggested that major expansion of Croy and Newlands would completely change their character, and would face strong opposition from residents.
- 4.30. Similarly none of the participants preferred **Option D**, although there was some support for the following elements:
- The improvements in public transport facilities were widely supported, although it was suggested that they should be included in all options.
 - There was some optimism that local residents could be convinced to use park and ride, bus and rail facilities - if they were regular and cheap enough.
 - There was significant scepticism about the likely success of such a large new settlement, particularly in light of experience of Culloden, Smithton and Balloch.

Focus Group 2

- 4.31. The second focus group was held at 7pm on 24 November 2004. 8 people attended the group including residents of Allanfearn, Ardersier(2), Balloch, Croy(2), Culloden and Smithton.
- 4.32. The group was generally opposed to major growth of smaller settlements, and therefore preferred the expansion of larger settlements or the development of new settlements. There was also some concern about the extent to which new development would destroy good agricultural land in some of the locations identified in the options, and it was suggested that development should be focused on marginal or poorer land.

- 4.33. Overall the preference was for **Option D**, although reservations were expressed about the following elements.
- Support was strong for the proposals to upgrade transport links and services, particularly the A96 dualling and the rail halt at the Airport. It was suggested that trains may be a more popular form of public transport than a bus shuttle service, as long as they were at regular frequency, unlike now.
 - While there was little optimism about the possibility of the new settlement benefiting Nairn if shopping and other facilities are improved, the majority view was that Inverness would remain the focus for the area in this option.
 - Concern was expressed that a major central settlement could open up the possibility of Nairn and Inverness merging in the future.
 - There was also concern that the new settlement could encroach on Croy - landscaping and screening would be required.
 - It was suggested that the location identified for development was reserved as green belt in the Local Plan and would be vigorously opposed by the Community Council.
- 4.34. The following reservations were expressed regarding **Option A**:
- It was noted that the sites identified for new settlements were on good agricultural land, although the land wasn't being intensively used at present.
 - It was noted that the proposed new developments were on existing flight paths, and there was concern that this could be a major problem if air traffic increases due to the Airport expansion.
 - Some felt that business in Nairn could benefit from the creation of new local communities but others suggested that most of the benefit would go to Inverness. There was also concern that the by pass could isolate Nairn and harm trade.
 - There was some opposition to the major expansion of Ardersier and it was suggested that residents would be hostile to proposals to alter the identity of the village.
 - Development at the Fabrication Yard was more popular, although some felt that the area could be better used to provide employment.
- 4.35. There was some limited support for the expansion of major settlements in **Option B**, but the following reservations were also expressed:
- It was suggested that expanding larger existing settlements would be preferable to major growth of small settlements.
 - Upgrading of the A96 was seen as essential, although some suggested that even a dual carriageway could not handle the increase in traffic associated with the projected growth.
 - Concern remained that the expansion of Nairn would encroach on agricultural land.
 - Some were unsure of the feasibility of major development to the east of Inverness due to existing sewerage works north of the A96 and concern that development to the south A96 would cover all of the land between Culloden and the A96.

- 4.36. There was strong opposition to the major growth of small settlements in **Option C**. Participants, including some residents, were fundamentally opposed to the 'destruction' of small communities through major development.

Focus Group 3

- 4.37. The third focus group was held at 1.30pm on 25 November 2004. 10 people attended the group including residents of Ardersier(2), Balloch, Croy, Dalcross, Gollanfield, Nairn(3) and Westhill.
- 4.38. The majority of the group favoured Options A or D and were generally opposed to growth around Inverness; there was a strong feeling that the city has had and will have sufficient growth. There was strong support for growth at Ardersier Fabrication Yard although participants were split between Option A (housing and employment) and Option B (industry only). Some reservations were expressed about siting housing and industry in close proximity to each other, although it was recognised that this would not necessarily be an issue if there were other forms of employment provided. The possibility of developing the area for tourism and leisure (eg a marina development possibly with housing and commercial/retail) also had some support.
- 4.39. An option combining specific elements of Options A and D was preferred including the following elements:
- A major new central settlement (Option D);
 - Extension of Ardersier (Option A or C);
 - One new settlement between Nairn and Ardersier (Option A); and
 - Major transport improvement.
- 4.40. Overall participants felt that **Option A** would be beneficial for the eastern end of the corridor and the following points were made:
- The development of the Fabrication Yard for both housing and employment was popular.
 - Participants were less sure how growth at Ardersier village could be successfully managed - it was agreed that the village needed to expand to be sustainable but the scale of the proposed growth was considered excessive and inappropriate by some.
 - All participants supported the upgrading of the A96.
 - There was optimism that growth could benefit Nairn but some were concerned about the scale of new infrastructure and facilities required to service the new developments - "another 2 Nairns".
 - There was some concern about the extent to which the new settlements would rely on road networks - new rail and/or ferry services were suggested as an alternative although it was noted that this may involve moving new settlements to link with the existing rail line.
 - There was some concern that proposed new settlements could lie within or adjacent to Ministry of Defence land.

- 4.41. **Option D** was also popular with most participants for the following reasons:
- There was strong support for the transport improvements included in the option, especially the dualling of the A96, shuttle bus service and park and ride facilities.
 - Some felt that rail travel may be more popular and practical, but it was also recognised that very frequent shuttle buses would also be attractive.
 - Participants felt that a new central settlement would be preferable to major growth of smaller settlements and the further expansion of Inverness.
- 4.42. Participants supported some elements of **Option B** but were generally opposed to the pattern of growth proposed. Points made include the following:
- There was strong support for growth at Ardersier Fabrication Yard - it was suggested that this would naturally attract people to Ardersier itself and thus support growth of the village. Some felt that the Fabrication Yard would be better used for housing and more limited employment/industry.
 - There was support for a new rail halt at the Airport and possibly by Nairn, but less so for a new halt towards Inverness.
 - Most were opposed to further development at Inverness.
 - There was some concern that Nairn would lose its identity as a small seaside town - it was suggested that potential residents would be more attracted by a series of small towns.
- 4.43. There was no real support for **Option C** for the following reasons:
- It was suggested that the option focused growth more towards Inverness and away from Nairn, and did not provide the growth/investment that Nairn requires.
 - Participants felt that growth at Croy and Newlands would turn them into dormitories of Inverness and would not benefit the corridor as a whole.
 - There was disappointment that the option did not include the upgrading of the A96.

Focus Group 4

- 4.44. The fourth focus group was held at 8pm on 25 November 2004. 13 people attended the group including residents of Ardersier, Assich(3), Balloch, Croy/Cantray(3), Dalcross(2), Loch Flemington, Nairn and Tornagrain.
- 4.45. The majority of participants in this group strongly opposed the envisaged scale of proposed growth, and found it difficult initially to show enthusiasm for any of the options. However contrasting views emerged on how the proposed growth should be delivered. While some felt that a string of new communities would be preferable, others suggested that further expansion of Inverness and Nairn was most appropriate. Scepticism regarding the Council's ability to successfully deliver a 'new town' of quality and concerns about whether such communities can ever be balanced, sustainable and have a strong identity and cohesion were the main reasons behind the views of those who supported the growth of existing settlements.

- 4.46. The group as a whole preferred **Option B**; 10 of the 13 participants indicated that this was their preferred option although the following reservations and potential modifications were suggested:
- Most preferred the principle of expanding the major settlements at either end of the corridor, rather than ‘sprawling’ growth in the centre of the corridor – many were concerned about possible future conglomeration of settlements.
 - There was a general preference for using the Ardersier Fabrication Yard for industrial/employment use rather than new housing development.
 - Participants supported the creation of a new rail halt at the Airport and at the 2 main new development locations. It was suggested that the transport improvements included in Option D could be incorporated.
 - It was suggested that further development east of Inverness could extend the current area of traffic congestion.
- 4.47. Although there was some strong support for some features of **Option A**, in particular those linked to roads and transport, serious reservations were expressed about the likely success of the proposed new settlements. Comments included the following:
- There was strong support for increased use of existing rail links in general, and a new rail halt at the Airport in particular. Most felt that a well designed rail terminal with sufficient parking would be used as an alternative to cars.
 - Participants also supported the dualling of the A96 and the provision of new by passes at Nairn and Inverness.
 - Some were concerned that poor drainage may affect development at or around Ardersier Fabrication Yard. Alternative uses for the Fabrication Yard were suggested, including a marina development (without housing) or a ferry connection.
 - Some participants were sceptical about the possibility of creating viable new communities rather than just a series of new housing estates – the provision of varied housing and facilities was seen as vital.
 - Concern was expressed regarding the possible future conglomeration of proposed new settlements to become a suburb of Nairn.
 - Significant concern was expressed about the failure of Nairn to provide a good range of quality amenities and facilities. However, some felt that the pattern of development proposed in Option A may not help Nairn unless Nairn itself also grows – many felt that Inverness would remain the focus for shopping and services although it was suggested that any increase in the local labour pool would benefit Nairn’s businesses.
- 4.48. There was little support in the group for any aspects of **Option C**, with residents of the smaller settlements suggested for growth particularly opposed. Others suggested that more upgrading of transport links (especially the A96) and other amenities would make the option more palatable.
- All felt that the current level of traffic required the dualling of the A96 and provision of new by passes; as the option would not ease traffic flows on the A96 it was felt that upgrading should be included. It was also suggested that road links to Ardersier would need to be upgraded to serve the expanded population.

- The fact that the option had potentially weaker justification for the upgrading of the A96 and existing train links was seen as a major draw back.
- Croy residents were particularly concerned that the proposals would destroy the character of the towns and drive existing residents away. It was generally felt that small villages could not successfully absorb rapid growth, and that new development would merely be satellites to the existing settlements and would be unlikely to become integrated based on previous experience.
- Some suggested that individual plot growth would be a more appropriate growth mechanism in these communities than rapid large scale expansion.
- Concern was expressed about new development encroaching on Culloden battlefield and affecting the local tourism industry.

4.49. Although proposed transport upgrades were popular, few supported other aspects of **Option D**:

- The group were largely in favour of the proposed transport upgrades, although it was suggested that they would be beneficial irrespective of which option was adopted.
- There was some disagreement regarding the likely success of improved bus and rail services. Some felt that greater use of train links would help to ease traffic flows while others suggested that high frequency bus services may be more flexible in terms of destination (eg for those working outwith the city centre).
- There was some concern about the extent to which a large new central development would erode existing green land.
- Support was somewhat stronger for growth at Nairn with the possibility of generating better facilities within the town. However, others were concerned that major growth away from the hub of Inverness was not practical, and that the scale of development may “swamp” Nairn.

Consultative Conference

4.50. A wide range of views on potential patterns of future development were expressed, partly influenced by the extent to which proposed development impacted on the communities that were represented by Community Council members at the conference. There were differences of opinion regarding the preferred approach in terms of the creation of new communities or expansion of existing settlements, and preference for a number of smaller settlements or focus on a single large settlement.

4.51. Most participants seemed to feel that focusing the majority of future growth in a single location was preferable to numerous areas of new development and there was real concern about the future conglomeration of settlements.

- 4.52. However, some were clearly sceptical about the extent to which a 'new town' could be successfully delivered and about whether the new population could integrate with existing communities. Related to this were more general concerns about whether the required infrastructure and facilities would be provided alongside new development, and provided at the appropriate time. A number of participants suggested that the Council had a bad record on the successful delivery of infrastructure and some felt that, irrespective of finalised plans, it "just won't happen".
- 4.53. Some participants felt that any major development should centre on Inverness to preserve the character of the corridor. It was also pointed out that the city is likely to remain the focus in terms of employment. However, others suggested constraints on growth east of Inverness, eg existing sewerage works, the need to maintain Culloden, Smithton and Balloch as separate communities. There was some support for the creation of a single new settlement between Nairn and Ardersier, in place of the string of new communities suggested in option A. Of course, concerns about the feasibility of 'new towns' remained.
- 4.54. There was some limited support for **Option A**, although some had reservations about the threat of creating 'a continual sprawl' from Nairn. Points made included the following:
- The rail halt at the Airport was popular with most although some concern was expressed regarding how popular the halt would be with current car users. It was agreed that proper scheduling of trains would encourage greater use of the rail link.
 - There was concern that future conglomeration would mean that large scale development near to Nairn effectively extends Nairn to the size of Inverness.
 - Concern was also expressed about the possibility of Nairn's services and facilities expanding sufficiently to serve the new communities.
 - Participants felt that Ardersier Fabrication Yard was relatively remote from Ardersier and the A96, and may not be able to sustain significant housing development.
 - It was agreed that Ardersier had declining services and there was some limited support for the expansion of Ardersier, although some felt that the success of any expansion would depend on the extent to which sufficient jobs could be provided locally. It was also suggested that road links to Ardersier would need to be upgraded to serve the expanded population.
- 4.55. There was also some limited support for **Option B** largely because it avoided any development in the middle of the corridor. However, the following possible constraints on the suggested locations for growth were suggested:
- Participants felt that industrial development at Ardersier Fabrication Yard would need a sizeable local labour pool, and that expansion of Ardersier village would be required.
 - Residents of Culloden, Smithton and Balloch were opposed to the erosion of the green wedge between the towns and the A96, and were keen to remain distinct from Inverness.

- 4.56. There was little or no support for **Option C** and some participants were strongly opposed to the major growth of smaller settlements. Comments made included the following:
- There was little support for a new rail halt at Newlands/Culloden Moor as it would not serve the corridor as a whole.
 - Participants expressed some concern that development would encroach on Culloden battlefield and have an adverse impact on local tourism.
 - Some participants were strongly opposed to the expansion of the smaller settlements; it was suggested that Croy would remain a dormitory town due to its position. There was also concern that the scale of growth would destroy the local area and its attractiveness to tourists.
 - Participants were sceptical about whether upgraded B roads between Croy and the A9 south could handle the increase in traffic alone and the need for upgraded links with the A96 eg from Croy would also be required.
- 4.57. While the group generally supported proposals to upgrade transport systems in **Option D**, opinion was divided regarding the feasibility of a single large new settlement. The following comments were made:
- Participants were largely in favour of the proposed transport upgrades as a means of easing pressure on the A96, although some were sceptical as to whether local residents would be drawn away from their car and make use of public transport. It was suggested that frequency and pricing would be vital to the success of any new services.
 - There was more support for park and ride proposals, although the scale of the parking areas required (substantial) to make them successful was an issue for some.
 - There was some support for the creation of a large new central settlement, although concerns were expressed about the failure of other 'new towns'. There were also concerns about the siting of the settlement in particular that it would encroach on to Croy.
 - Finally, some suggested that the projected population growth was over ambitious and that both the creation of a large new settlement and expansion of existing settlements could not be justified or indeed sustained.
- 4.58. This latter point raised interesting issues regarding the location, phasing and control of new developments. If a decision was made to go for a single large new settlement for example, as suggested in Option 4, or indeed a number of small communities as in Option A, their success could potentially be jeopardised by simultaneous more attractive development in other locations eg extension to Nairn or Balloch or by a lack of housing demand if current projections for population growth do not materialise. There was a feeling that if the preferred solution is to go for new communities that there should be strong controls on development elsewhere in the corridor to ensure their success.

5. CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1. There was a clear opposition to the scale of the proposed growth; indeed many participants expressed considerable surprise and some scepticism about the projected population increases, particularly in the context of national population decreases. Suggestions that proposals may have been influenced by over-optimism based on Inverness' new city status were common.
- 5.2. There were also strong concerns about the feasibility of accommodating up to 30,000 new residents within the corridor area, and some resentment that the character and quality of the area would be compromised to meet the needs of the expanding city. The lack of sufficient employment opportunities was a major factor in participants' cool reaction to the scale of proposed growth and many felt that both the A96 corridor and the city region could not provide sufficient employment to sustain the projected population increase.
- 5.3. The provision of adequate new infrastructure and amenities to service the increased population was also a major issue for participants, with schools and hospitals the most pressing concern. However, most participants were somewhat resigned to the fact that major growth was going to take place and were able to offer considered opinions on the 4 strategic development options.
- 5.4. Opinion was split in terms of preferred patterns of growth with some participants wanting to minimise the impact on the corridor by expanding existing settlements, while others supported the creation of new communities. There was widespread scepticism regarding the prospects for successful delivery of new communities the size of a 'new town' or a 'new Nairn' and for the required supporting infrastructure and amenities. Nevertheless, options proposing the creation of new communities of varying sizes tended to be the most popular, particularly Option A or a variation of it.
- 5.5. In terms of the key features proposed in the options, opinions were highly varied but a number of preferences were identifiable and these are summarised below.
 - Dualling of the A96 was the most popular specific proposal - participants clearly felt that this was long overdue and it was generally agreed that the issue would need to be addressed before any major development could go ahead. Support was also widespread for the provision of by-passes at Nairn and, to a lesser extent, the Raigmore Interchange. The volume of traffic carried through Nairn was a significant concern for local residents.
 - Participants felt that the wider local roads network and public transport links must also be upgraded alongside any future growth. There was strong support for a new rail halt at the Airport, but less so for new halts towards Inverness and Nairn. Most felt that a high frequency, low cost shuttle bus service would be attractive in the context of any of the strategic options. Park and ride services were also popular, in particular at the Airport to link with a new rail halt, subject to their being adequate low or nil cost car parking.

- Opinion was split regarding the provision of substantial new settlements, particularly in light of concerns about the Council's ability to successfully deliver a new town of a high quality with the required infrastructure and amenities and sympathetic to the environment. Nevertheless, there was some support for a new central settlement and Option D was the preferred option for a number of participants although support was generally stronger for the creation of a series of smaller settlements as illustrated in Option A.
 - Opinion was similarly split regarding the expansion of Nairn and Inverness. The possibility of revitalising Nairn and its services was a major attraction for some and proposals for growth at or near to Nairn were popular. There was less support for further growth at Inverness - many were concerned that this would exacerbate Inverness's pull and its detrimental effect on the corridor in terms of the quality and development of local services.
 - Expansion of Ardersier village was supported by most, although some had reservations about the scale of growth proposed in Option A. Again the potential to revitalise the village was a major factor in shaping people's views. Development at Ardersier Fabrication Yard was very popular although opinion was split regarding the type of development preferred; some supported the provision of housing alongside new employment or commercial/retail/tourist development while others wanted to maximise employment by reserving the site for industry only.
 - There was little, if any, support for proposals for growth at Croy and Newlands as featured in Option C – the lack of support was widespread and not restricted to those who lived in or near these communities. The destruction of the existing character of the communities and the surrounding environment were main concerns, although the potential negative impact on tourism and undermining the case for a full upgrade of the A96 were also important.
- 5.6. Finally it is recommended that as the masterplanning process continues to develop that the following steps are taken to continue and develop community consultation and input:
- Continue to test public opinion through the use of focus groups
 - Examine ways to attract a wider range of attendance at such focus groups in particular to include those that would not normally take part in such consultation activities including non home owners and younger people under 30 eg recent housebuyers.
 - Make efforts to involve local youths in the process.