



Nairn West Community Council

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INNER MORAY FIRTH LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN – “CALL FOR SITES”

Nairn West Community Council Response

Introduction

This summary lists and describes the sites within the Nairn West CC area and beyond, where the Community Council thinks development might be possible and appropriate – with a brief indication of the reasons and constraints. It also identifies a rather larger number of sites where building should be prevented – for the reasons stated. Where possible, OS grid references have been provided. The final section offers some comments on the wider strategic-planning considerations affecting the choice of development sites.

A. Sites within Nairn West CC area

*i) Housing (The “West End” of Nairn, grid ref **NH 876 566**)*

1. The bulk of the NWCC area is already developed. Most is residential housing built in the Victorian period, with a limited amount of subsequent infill. This is one of the areas which gives Nairn its distinctive historic architectural character. The presence of a few large hotels from the same era, and the adaptation of larger old Victorian houses into B&B or care homes, helps to sustain this character and the calm tranquillity of the area, and this is the core of its appeal to tourists and visitors.
2. NWCC endorses the existing policy approach in paras 8 and 9 the 2000 Local Plan, of “safeguarding the function and character of established residential areas....”. This policy should be sustained. This implies no (re)development in the ‘West End’ which is incompatible with the existing character of the neighbourhood. Multi-occupancy, high-density modern housing units – and/or business premises unrelated to tourism – would be incompatible with this approach.

ii) Green areas and open spaces

3. There are four important green spaces in the NWCC area. The Nairn Golf Club course [NH 868 567] should – self-evidently – be protected from any building-encroachment: it is a key asset to the town. The fields and grounds of the Newton Hotel [NH 872 565] and the Achareidh woods [NH 869 564] nearby are, similarly, a part of the unique appeal of the hotel and a valued open natural space. There has already been some building on former hotel grounds (the housing at Newton Gate). There should be no further or new development on this site – other than possible refurbishment of the existing hotel building itself.
4. The Farmers' Showfield [NH 879 562] is one of only two significant green spaces remaining in the town centre, and deserves protection. It is used for a variety of recreational purposes. Part of it – 0.6 ha – has however already been zoned for housing (para 10.f of the 2000 Local Plan). This is only justifiable if it guarantees, as an immutable condition, the preservation of the remainder as public open space.
5. Finally, the Links [NH 882 569] (cricket field, bandstand and recreational area) and the West Links [NH 879 569] (the crazy-golf putting-green course, the woodland park and children's play area) are in the NWCC area. This is Common Good land, adjacent to and giving access to the main beaches which are Nairn's principal asset. These sites should be inviolable and must be preserved as public amenity space and protected from any other form of development. There must be a presumption against any form of construction, and also against the expansion of the tarmac car-parking area.

iii) Tourism/business

6. As noted in para 2 above, the only business activity in the West End of Nairn is that related to tourism and recreation (hotels, B&Bs, golf and bowling). There are residential homes for the elderly, and a dental surgery. There should be a presumption against any form of business premises inconsistent with the residential character of the area, although micro businesses employing the householder and one or two employees within a house which does not change the character of that house should be viewed sympathetically. Businesses emerging from "back-bedrooms" and garages are a vital first step for many a new enterprise incapable of sustaining premises separate from the owner's own house in its embryo stage.

iv) Other planning considerations: traffic and parking

7. Within the next 10 years (during which the proposed bypass is unlikely to be built) issues of traffic, access and parking are likely to become critical in this and indeed other residential parts of Nairn. A substantial increase in through traffic ("ratrunning") is the biggest single threat to the character and quality of this historic part of Nairn as well as a safety hazard in a residential zone with elderly people and children. Construction of

additional obstacles (eg chicanes and road humps) in the residential streets addresses only the symptoms, not the cause, of the problem. A more proactive and integrated approach to traffic planning and the management of the A96 is essential.

8. Part of the strategy – in the West End and indeed throughout the town - must involve the designation of more extensive dedicated cycle routes and pedestrian-priority zones, possibly linked to “access for residents only” cross-streets in order to discourage the diversion of trunk-road through-traffic into residential areas.

B. Sites in Nairn Town Centre

i) Currently-vacant “brownfield” sites

9. There has already been substantial discussion of the central town centre site [NH 882 565] largely owned by the Highland Council and the Co-op (with the adjacent leased “Library” site and car park). The approach agreed in discussion with the community is that this should be redeveloped to deliver a suitably diverse mix of town-centre features: business and retail premises, public amenity civic space, parking, and possibly some residential accommodation. All this should complement the existing High Street and be visually appealing to visitors, tourists and the local community.
10. The nearby derelict bus station site [NH 881 565] should be redeveloped – ideally in tandem with the main HC/Co-op town centre site – as part of a coherent plan for the regeneration of the town centre. This also requires rationalisation of the existing unsatisfactory multiplicity of junctions and access/egress points along this short stretch of the A96.

ii) Existing town centre

11. The future of the main High Street/Harbour Street zone [NH 884 566] is a matter of design and planning rather than new building. Major public buildings (Courthouse, Museum, etc) should be restored and enhanced in line with the 2000 Local Plan (Policy S1, para 3, page.31). NWCC supports the proposal – made in the 2000 Local Plan (para 4.5, page 25) but not yet implemented – for the extension of Conservation Area status to a substantial part of the historic town centre.

iii) Green areas and open spaces

12. In addition to the Farmers’ Showfield and the Links (see above), the other vital green space in the town centre is Viewfield [NH 880 566]. This has already suffered encroachment: initially a bowling green and sports centre, and latterly the police station and new community centre. It remains a key feature of the town, and a public amenity

space, and must be protected from further building. A sensitive redesign of the “Co-op” town centre site and bus station needs to take account of the visual significance of the Viewfield vista and in doing so encourage access and use of the space.

13. The vicinity of the harbour in Fishertown including the “Parkie” [NH 886 571] has been blighted by inappropriate development and the enclosure of previously open spaces. Nevertheless this location adjacent to the beach, harbour and caravan site is highly sensitive. Any bids to (re)develop or build in this area should be treated with great care.
14. The Riverside – from the mouth at the harbour [NH 888 571] all the way up to the Howford bridge [NH 876 538] and beyond – is a natural feature, important for wildlife, walking and fishing. It deserves protection from building. The only justifiable development might be measures to enable better public pedestrian/cycle access along both sides of the river, together with action to maintain and manage the trees and keep the riverbank safe and accessible to fishers and others.

C. Sites in the wider Nairn town area

i) The Maggot

15. In line with the preservation of the Riverside for public access and use, the green space of the Maggot [NH 888 568], which is used for dog-walking, recreation and informal sport, should be protected from any building. The space is an important adjunct to the caravan site, and ensures an open aspect towards the harbour and the Firth.

ii) Balmakeith and Lochloy

16. The housing developments at Lochloy [NH 899 569] are almost built out (and in the process have breached the skyline in contravention of the 2000 Local Plan). But delivery of infrastructure – and in particular an alternative access over the railway to the east – should be included in the new LDP.
17. Balmakeith [NH 896 563] is under-utilised as an industrial/business park, with several empty plots and buildings. In the new IMFLDP the zoning and provision of additional industrial and business sites elsewhere in or around Nairn should be conditional on, and subsequent to, the full occupancy of the Balmakeith park – which could be extended eastwards if demand for sites were to increase.

iii) South Nairn

18. There is an inherent contradiction between the current zoning of South Nairn [NH 878 553] for housing; the national policy guidance which presumes against building on prime

agricultural land except where absolutely essential; and the aspirations of the owners of the existing industrial sawmill **[NH 878 555]** where land has already been zoned for its expansion. A further constraint is the bottleneck of the railway bridge. All these considerations argue for a radical re-think of the current zoning. One option might be a redesignation of part of the site immediately adjacent to the sawmill for other (light industrial/commercial) development, accessed from Balblair Road (which could be closed at its eastern end) once the bypass is closer to realisation.

iv) The Sandown Common Good land

19. The Sandown land **[NH 863 560]** has been zoned for housing development (with adjacent Delnies land earmarked for golf course, hotel, housing and other recreational/amenity facilities). NWCC is not persuaded that this is the best or most appropriate use for the Sandown land, and believes that the new LDP should outline other possible alternative options. In particular the zoning of the north-eastern field, just west of the existing housing for a business park would seem undesirable. Such business development would be much more beneficially sited in Nairn South (see above) as a buffer between the sawmill and the eventual possible development of housing beyond. Another option might be a part-exchange for the Farmers' Showfield, and a third might be the subdivision and disposal of [some of] the land separately for development by a range of different investors as a way of ensuring diversity and the 'phasing' of building. A variety of building styles can be a positive advantage over the last-century approach of uniform "people-factory housing" styles.

v) Tradespark woods

20. The woods of Tradespark **[NH 870 558]** are much used and valued by nearby residents, and are a significant wildlife habitat. This site should be protected from all building and kept as natural and undisturbed as possible.

D. Other sites, and strategic development issues around Nairn

i) Housing

21. NWCC – and many others – have already challenged the assumptions on population growth and housing need set out in other planning documents, eg the non-statutory A96 Corridor Framework and the draft Highland-wide Local Development Plan. Some projections for housing-expansion in Nairn have already been slightly scaled down.

22. NWCC recognises that there is a requirement to provide for more housing. But we strongly believe that such growth should be balanced; should occur at a rate appropriate to the organic and gradual expansion of the town; should be based on modest and

realistic forecasts of local need rather than ambitious and excessive aspirations which imply a substantial inflow of people; and must only proceed after, or in step with (not ahead of) necessary improvements in infrastructure.

ii) Transport and access: the A96 and the Bypass

23. As noted in para 7 above, the most critical factor that will shape the development of Nairn over the next decade is the planning and delivery of revised and improved transport infrastructure. The long-discussed bypass is the most significant element, but possibly still the most uncertain. This makes it all the more important that the existing road network – trunk route, minor roads, and residential urban streets – should be planned and managed in ways which alleviate the existing problems of flow, congestion and capacity.

24. NWCC is opposed to transport measures which adversely affect the quality of life in the town, the ease of access to local services, and the safety of local residents. Recent evidence (on the impact of possible development at Sandown, the railway-bridge constraint in Nairn South, and the junction controls being introduced on the A96) gives serious cause for concern about the adequacy of local transport planning.

iii) Cycling and paths

25. Cycle usage in Nairn is higher than the national average – both for daily journeys and for recreation in the area. Officially-designated national cycle routes pass by, and through, the town. The terrain is mostly level and cycle-friendly. Greater cycle-use is environmentally sound and a national policy objective. Yet existing development plans scarcely acknowledge this, and make minimal practical provision for cycle paths. NWCC believes the new IMF LDP should assign a much higher priority to the creation and expansion of an integrated cycle-route network (and paths which also serve pedestrians and other users) both within existing and proposed urban areas and as part of a wider joined-up regional strategy.

iv) Industry and business

26. Provision of opportunities for enterprise, which provides employment, is a vital part of a development plan. NWCC believes three vital principles should be observed: first, that the designation of zones for business and industry should be aimed at, and linked to, the existing and sustainable economic activities of the local region (which are based on servicing and processing the outputs of a largely rural, agricultural, and recreational economy). Second, that the designation of new business and industrial zones and the provision of associated infrastructure should be aimed at high-value-added, low-impact enterprises (IT services, for example, rather than heavy industrial processes). Third, that such zones should be located so as to complement and enhance existing development

and to minimise the generation of additional car-commuter traffic. This argues for dispersal rather than a concentration of new industrial and business sites.

v) Tourism and recreational facilities

27. Nairn in particular, and indeed the whole of the Inner Moray Firth, is a significant and – so far – still largely unspoilt tourist area. The unique environment (coasts, beaches, open land and scenery) and considerable urban history and architecture, are vital assets which attract large tourist inflows, offer a considerable range of recreational opportunities, and consequently generate substantial employment and income.

28. This can only be sustained if the natural features which appeal to visitors remain visible, attractive and unspoilt by inappropriate development. A key and integral part of development planning is thus to leave alone, or indeed to protect, the visual appeal and natural attractions of an undeveloped environment. So any assessment of sites for possible development must weigh especially carefully the potential impact on tourism.

Nairn West Community Council
26 April 2011